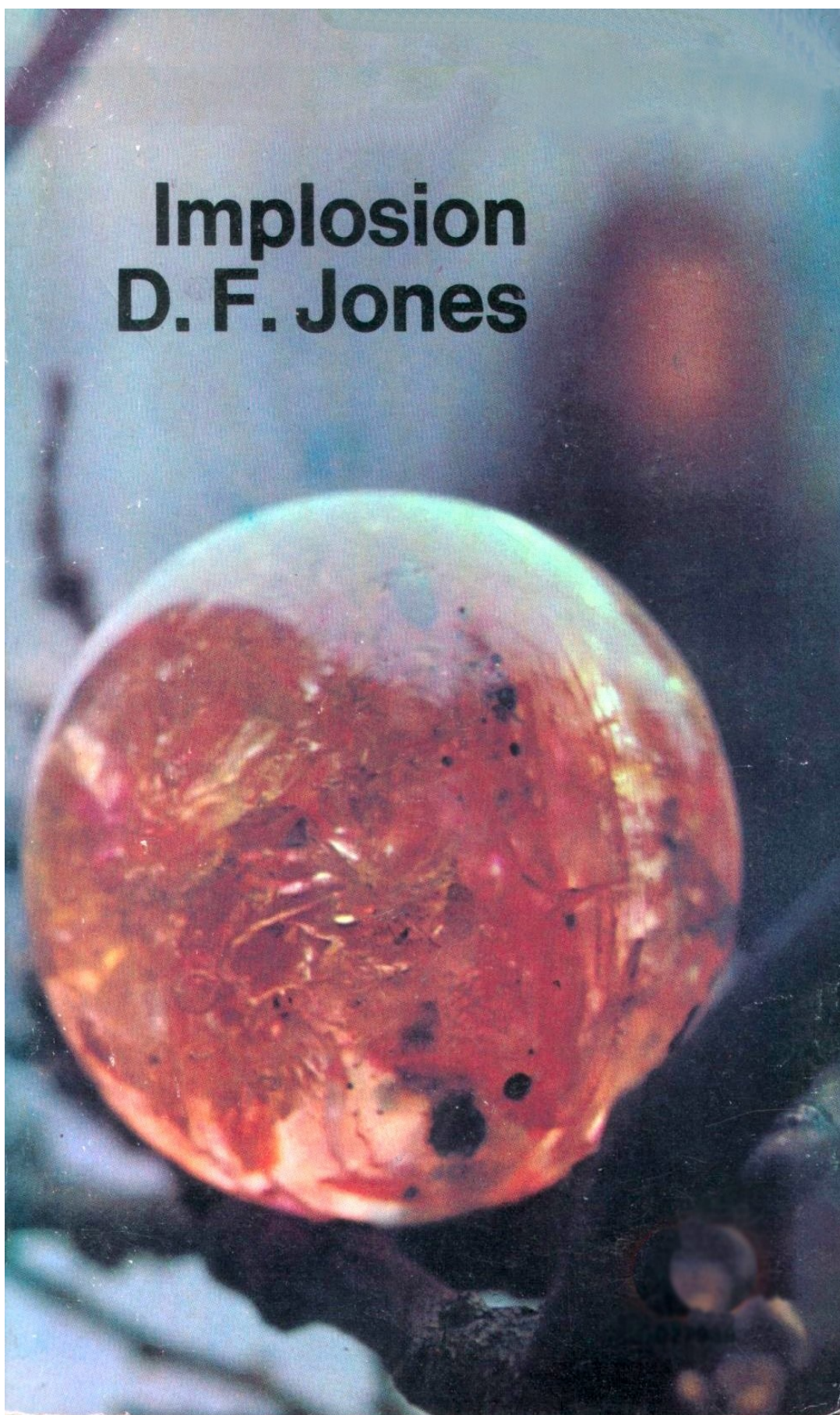


Implosion

D. F. Jones



Implosion

D.F. Jones
1967

for Helen

PART ONE

Chapter One

As a research establishment it had no great reputation or tradition. It had, in fact, been created in an expansive moment by the People's Government, largely as a status symbol. By the 1950's even minor Soviet satellites felt the need to assert themselves, and this one, unable to afford an atomic reactor or a cyclotron, plumped for a chemical research centre.

It was housed in an old palace – of which there were any number – and sketchily furnished with cast-off and obsolescent

equipment obtained from Russia and Poland. But there is no substitute for creative ability, and the Karl Marx Institute had one outstanding man. To work there at all, he had to be. The Institute was ill-lit, damp, draughty and about as sterile as a pigsty. The Institute was also understaffed.

In what had been the ballroom, as the squeaking parquet floor still proclaimed, this man was standing beside one of four long benches which ran the length of the room, showing one particular cage to the Director.

"This group, Director." He stood back, a tall, very thin figure, his bony hands plunged into the pockets of his long white coat, his gaze shifting between the Director and the cage.

The Director, a short, bulky man, peered

into the cage. A dozen white mice, pink-eyed, noses twitching, stared beadily back. There was silence in the long room, the bench shook gently as a tram rumbled by in the street below.

"They certainly look very healthy."

"They are, they are!"

"Yet it is six months since treatment?"

"To be precise, one hundred and ninety-two days."

"Incredible!" said the Director, and meant it. He stood lost in thought, already planning how this might be presented to the Minister with the maximum kudos – for the Director. He smiled, "My dear fellow! It's quite amazing – it'll create quite a stir,

even if it is of limited practical value. It breaks new ground..."

The white-coated man smiled gently, matching the gentle unbelief in his voice.

"You don't mean that, Director." He waved one hand as if dismissing a rather feeble joke.

Instantly the Director was stiff, defensive, "I don't see..."

"Of course." The reply was smooth, understanding. "I failed to realise that while this work is everything to me, you have so much else."

Both knew the Director's M.D. had been obtained shortly after the war when medical training had been, to put it kindly,

primitive. They also knew that the Director had moved, at the earliest possible moment, from the practical to the administrative side and, as a thoroughgoing and sincere Party member, had done very well.

"Very well, how wide is its application – tell me!"

"In its present form, in four or five years we should be saving about one percent of the state budget."

The Director blinked as he did mental arithmetic. "But that's colossal! You can't seriously mean that?"

"Oh yes, I had an economist check."

"Who?" cut in the Director sharply. "You

know no outside agency can be approached without my authority!"

"It was all quite unofficial. I posed what appeared a hypothetical question to – (he mentioned a very powerful man in the Ministry of Economics) in the course of conversation."

The Director looked at his subordinate in a new light. "I didn't know you knew him."

"Yes. Quite well, really. We play chess together twice a week – he finds my game interesting."

"I see. Well, I rely on your discretion. The Minister would not like the news to leak out prematurely."

The tall man inclined his gleaming bald

head. "Of course. But, if I may say so, I do not think you noted what I said."

The Director had not got to his position by sheer luck. He glowered. "Very well, Comrade, you may say so. I didn't note what you said – tell me again!"

"Your pardon, Director. I said 'in its present form.' This preparation – I call it Test Fourteen – is only effective with rodents." He ran a thin finger lightly along the wire of the cage in a highly theatrical gesture which annoyed the Director still further. "In its present form."

The Director felt his way carefully. "You mean the same effect could be achieved with other – higher – forms of life?"

The sad eyes snapped shut with startling

suddenness, the long fleshless head tilted back, and the eyes opened slowly, staring deep into the Director's.

"Yes, Director. The very highest."

Chapter Two

Doctor John Bart, M.D., CH.M., looked with irritated apprehension at the intercom unit on his oversize desk. Even after ten days, he was still uneasy with the device, never entirely sure when it was switched off. And in the Ministry of Health in August 1972 it was highly desirable to know.

He glanced coldly at his new secretary, wishing she would stop playing with her pencil. She in turn regarded her new boss, the Minister, with some caution. Ten years as a top secretary in the Civil Service had

given her a wide experience of politicians and others. This one was different – but then everything was different now.

"That will be all, Miss Parkins. Type that last one first, leave it on my desk. Switch all urgent calls for me to Downing Street before you leave – and call my wife, please. Tell her I'll be late."

Miss Parkins raised one well-trained eyebrow imperceptibly. This had happened every evening, and already it was getting harder to find just the right tone to tell his wife.

Bart uncoiled himself and stood up. He did not so much sit in a chair, as nest in it. Tall, dark and rangy, in the States he would have inevitably been taken for a Texan. His rather stern expression did not flatter him, and he looked his age, thirty-six. But thus

far, life had been kind to him. Nearly twenty years of hard, absorbing work had produced their reward, a very lucrative practice in Wimpole Street. He was literally a Master of his profession and a brilliant surgical career had been confidently predicted, but Bart was dedicated to medicine, and much as he disliked the idea, felt that the parlous state of the medical profession made it his duty to stand for Parliament.

His by-election had surprised a good many, not least the other candidates. Devoted to his profession, shy, of austere expression and nature, he had little that was readily attractive to the electorate, but Bart got in. Politically innocent, his transparent honesty won votes. In his campaign he made no concessions, no smooth answers, no glib promises. Like Sir Alan Herbert before him, he went into

Parliament with one intention, and did not try to conceal it.

In April 1972, shortly after his election, he had married a young – she was only twenty – and attractive wife, and installed her in a modest house, small but expensive, in Stanhope Mews, s.w.7. Its red brick with Portland stone trim was distinctly neo-Georgian, and delighted them both – which was just as well, for there was no time for a honeymoon.

In and out of the House, Bart worked with single-minded tenacity for a major reconstruction of the Health Service, but he had been aware of the ominous groundswell, harbinger of the coming storm, even before he was elected. Although he ignored it, it is possible that it was a very real help to him in his campaign.

When he had time to think about it, it seemed to Bart that his marriage had been the signal for the storm to break. There were rumours, charges, countercharges, scarcely veiled hints in the press that "the nation must be told" which reminded older readers with good memories, of the abdication of King Edward VIII. The vast majority of the population was really in the dark, and many were inclined to regard the whole thing as yet another political stunt. But gradually, the man in the street began to realise that there were some pretty odd stories circulating.

Perhaps poultry-keepers were the first to see the beginning of the trouble. There were isolated occurrences of hen fertility failing disastrously; one chick-breeding firm slumped to bankruptcy. There was much talk of a new virus infection, or genetic

damage due to excessive inbreeding, but no one appears to have considered the water supply. However, few – apart from housewives, who complained bitterly about the sharp rise in egg prices – took much notice.

And then the stories moved closer to the public consciousness, stories with a local background, the local nursing home, the hospital. Slowly, very slowly, people began to tie local events to the mysterious, elusive hints in the press – ITV said little, and the BBC nothing – and the crisis was on.

Questions proliferated in the Commons. The Government vacillated, denied, hinted and contradicted earlier statements. Platitudes poured forth. Then came the break; a Government plan to import women was revealed in the press. Thoroughly

alarmed, members of all parties demanded a full explanation, refusing to be fobbed off any longer by the plea that it was "in the interests of the nation" that the matter was kept secret. The Premier elected to speak to the nation on TV.

He made an appalling mess of it, enlightening few, and alarming practically everybody. Watched by thirty-five millions, his painful gyrations and evasions united the nation in an unprecedented way. The surging tide of public opinion was overwhelming; the Government – and the Opposition – had to go. Both had lost the confidence of the country. Alarmed, desperate even, the electorate wanted leadership, and the truth.

The New Britain Party grew almost overnight, and support came from all quarters. Many M.P.'s quickly transferred

their allegiance, some because they were astute enough to see where the future lay, others, like Bart, because they were convinced the old system could not handle the situation.

Quite without precedent, elections were held a bare fortnight after the Government's fall. Significantly, no one suggested that there was not enough time to prepare. An old order died when the Premier made his TV appearance.

All parties went down before the onslaught of the NBP and sheer chaos reigned for a few days; then a new Government emerged — and Bart was its youngest Minister. He had Cabinet rank, a key position, and much of the future of the nation lay in his hands.

His scanty political background was no great disadvantage, for the new administration was backed by nearly six hundred members; only fifteen members were in theoretical opposition. Party warfare had ceased to exist.

As Bart walked swiftly to Downing Street, he thought of the new Premier. Like Bart, he had been a back-bencher and something of a lone wolf. A blunt, Cromwellian man, George Farmer was well named. Bart, who had only known him slightly, hoped they might see eye to eye.

He nodded to the saluting policeman, ignoring the press. The famous door swung open almost magically. Inside, there was an atmosphere of well-oiled tradition which Bart found ended sharply at the Premier's door.

There was an air of urgency, almost revolution, about Farmer's study. The Prime Minister sat hunched over his desk in his shirtsleeves, deep in a sea of paper, a whiskey bottle at his elbow. He spoke without looking up. Bart stared at a mass of wiry grey hair.

"Sit down, John. Pour yourself a drink."

Bart took in the briefcase propped against the chair leg, the discarded jacket carelessly dropped on the floor. Here too was a man neither impressed nor overawed by his surroundings.

The Premier grunted triumphantly, scribbled furiously, his free hand groping for a button on his desk. With a flourish he initialled the document and held it out for his secretary before the man had entered the room. Farmer refilled his glass and

looked inquiringly at his visitor.

"No, thank you, Prime Minister."

"For God's sake, cut that out – we're not in the House! Now; tomorrow's Cabinet meeting. I want the last Government's investigation committee reformed. Perranwell's a good man. As far as he got he did a good job. I want him to continue as Chairman – any objections?"

"No," said Bart, slightly surprised, "why – should I?"

"I want things straight from the start. You might feel you should be in the chair."

"I've no time..."

"Good. He'll need your support. I want a

daily report from him – I'm making him a Minister without Portfolio which will help on all aspects of PROLOX. All Ministries are making studies of how they reckon they are affected. Perranwell's committee will consider and coordinate. This doesn't mean you can't talk direct to me, but I want you to keep them in the picture. OK?"

"I understand." Bart wondered if he had been called over just for this.

"Now the other thing. You're a good man, Bart. Wouldn't have picked you otherwise, but I'm not sure we quite understand each other yet. This is important. Before all this," he waved an arm at the world in general, "the Minister of Health was small beer. It's different now. There's me, the Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary – and you. We're the ones that count. We must work as a team – take this

PROLOX Committee. Job's to find out what happened, how it happened, who did it. Correct?"

"Certainly. There's no chance of repairing the damage until we know."

"Good. We see eye to eye so far. Where we split is what we do once we know exactly what has happened – correct?"

Bart was not going to be cut short again. "Frankly, I don't think we should concern ourselves with anything other than the rebuilding of the nation. I'm afraid you will dissipate some of our badly needed effort in punitive action – if there's someone to take action against."

"And that's where we differ. The country's in a damn' funny mood, John. No one, least of all the great British public,

knows the extent of the damage. But they do know they've been badly hurt, and they want action. By God, they want action." There was a world of feeling in his voice. "Our election proves that."

"But there's no proof we were attacked," protested Bart. "We've got to be extremely careful whom we accuse, never mind threaten or attack."

"It was an attack all right," replied the Premier with grim certainty. "The PROLOX Committee is still working – I fixed that – and this morning old Perranwell had news. A week ago someone in the Ministry of Science dug out a paper published in some obscure Scandinavian scientific journal, thought it looked interesting. It was. Called 'Some Observations on the Possible Use of Chlorinated Hydrocarbons as Selective Sterilants.' Written by some damned Slav,

Pavel something-or-the-other. Science had the wit to pass this to DGI..."

"DGI?"

"Director General, Intelligence. He set his hounds on this Pavel fellow's trail – now code-named GAYBIRD. Soon tracked him, too."

"It doesn't seem likely he would be anything to do with it," objected Bart, "he'd hardly publish his results."

"I thought that. DGI says that it looks as if GAYBIRD didn't realise exactly what he was on to at the time. Remember that was back in 1966. We've done a big check, and it's certain he's published nothing since. No, I've a shrewd suspicion he's our man."

"But why?"

"He's the chief research worker at a certain Karl Marx Institute, his country's sole contribution to science, and their chief prestige object — they can't afford an airline. Now; this is the point. We've quite a file on that little lot's Premier-cum-Party-Chairman. The story goes that he is the illegitimate son of a British diplomat who left his mother in the lurch. Sounds too good to be true, but true or not, he is a dedicated Anglophobe. That at least is certain."

"But surely, Prime Minister — George — you're not suggesting that a senior statesman is going to let personal animosity — no! It's all far too tenuous!"

"It gets less tenuous as we go on." The Premier produced a pipe and pouch from his jacket, and dropped the coat once more

on the floor. "All the evidence points to the attack being made in late autumn of 1971 – it was around April '72 we first began to smell a rat – and in January '72 GAYBIRD was made a Hero of Socialist Labour, Third Class. These people are a damned sight more class-conscious than we are, very careful about the rules. It's not surprising he got a gong, but we're convinced it was more than was reasonable. Should have been Fourth Class. He jumped a grade. Why?"

Bart had no answer to that. "What does this institute do?"

"I was coming to that. They've been solely concerned with agriculture. National showpiece – and God knows they need all the science they can get in their farming. Anyone fool enough to go there on a 'cultural' visit is always dragged round the

place. Always been wide open, but about six months ago burglar alarms were put in, bars fitted to ground-floor windows, and the two side entrances have been sealed up. They've also installed a plainclothes guard in the only entrance. Agriculture!"

Bart was silent.

"Right, it's not proof, but there's not a vestige of evidence against anyone else. As far as I'm concerned, it's enough to be going on with. I've ordered DGI to take a closer look at friend GAYBIRD!"

Chapter Three

On the fourth floor of that garage-like building – inside and out – the Ministry of Defence, DGI was making a very private phone call, dialling the number himself.

"I want HADRIAN." T h i s being the correct codeword for the day, he was connected without comment.

"HADRIAN? This is compass three." DGI waited while HADRIAN checked the daily changing list to see who was calling him. It might be the Prime Minister, the Minister of

Defence, one or two others. He was invited to continue.

"PROLOX—GAYBIRD. Could look at this situation in some detail please? As soon as convenient."

HADRIAN said yes in a stolid sort of way, and that was that. For a moment DGI mused upon the identity of HADRIAN. They had never met – so far as he knew. On appointment each DGI received a black book and certain verbal instructions. And that gave him more contact than most with the Secret Service.

HADRIAN did not waste much time. Within half an hour a message was on its way:

GROUP WEST FROM CENTRAL
IMMEDIATE TOPSEC GAYBIRD

INVESTIGATE URGENTLY

For forty-eight hours Group West worked very hard on GAYBIRD and his background. He was photographed, his height, probable weight, colour of eyes, hair noted. His professional record worked over, his hobbies discovered and his sex life checked.

Time being short, some unprofessional risks were taken. The comrade charlady who did for their subject in his bachelor flat was charmed by the young building inspector – even made him coffee. She would have been less charmed to know that while she was thus engaged he was taking an impression of her key to the flat, carelessly left by her on the hall table, and had time to plant micro-bugs in the lounge and bedroom. Further, on the pretext of examining a windowsill, he fixed a slow-

running sound-actuated tape recorder to the underside of the sill. His only worry was if the suction cups on the recorder would stick to the stonework, and they did. The friendly help was not to know that next day, when she left after her morning stint, he would let himself into the flat, remove his gear, search and photograph the apartment and be on his way before she reached her more humble abode a mile or so away.

At the end of the forty-eight hours Group West had quite a file on their subject. Much of it was quite useless, but:-

CENTRAL FROM GROUP WEST

TOPSEC

GAYBIRD PROMOTED TOP

EXPERIMENTAL POSITION
BIG PAY RISE NEW FLAT JAN 1971

LAST KNOWN WORK IN 1969 ON
INSECTICIDES ALL LATER WORK
SECRET

HAS CONGRATULATORY LETTER
FROM PARTY CHAIRMAN APRIL 71
REASON FOR CONGRATULATIONS
NOT STATED IN LETTER

That was enough for the Premier. Three hours after receipt of the message another order was on the way:

GROUP WEST FROM CENTRAL
FLASH TOPSEC GAYBIRD
INTERROGATE TO FINALITY

Even in the secrecy of his world, that was one message HADRIAN had to code himself. Death warrants are always special.

Outside the Karl Marx Institute agent EMIL cursed softly, GAYBIRD was working unusually late, and it was raining. The traffic, never heavy by Western standards, was getting less and less, the clanking trams fewer, and EMIL was beginning to feel conspicuous. There were too many chances being taken on this job for his liking – why all this interest in a lousy insect-chaser? For the twentieth time he pressed the transmit switch in the sodden pocket of his cheap raincoat and breathed into the lapel microphone. He had to steer the snatch car onto GAYBIRD. There had been little time to study the habits of their quarry, and he might easily go left or right on leaving the Institute. A tram came

clanging to the nearby stop. Automatically EMIL watched the few passengers get off. His cover was that he was waiting for a girl. He glanced ostentatiously at his watch, hoping he was not overacting. He had a nasty suspicion one shoe was leaking...

The Institute door opened. Silhouetted against the light was GAYBIRD's tall spare figure, EMIL whistled softly into his microphone. One long note meant the quarry was alone.

GAYBIRD hesitated in the face of the rain, then walked down the steps and turned right, EMIL whistled the series of shorts that indicated direction to the car two blocks away. His job was finished.

A car power-drifted round the corner, its cloud of spray brilliant in the light of a tram.

The headlights flicked on, picking out the figure of the hurrying scientist, crouched against the rain, in blazing yellow light, GAYBIRD half turned as the car mounted the pavement... the body arched into the air, the arms spread out grotesquely as it crashed down on the bonnet, to be swept off as the car swerved away, bumping violently off the pavement.

EMIL screamed silently between clenched teeth. "The fools! The raving bleeding fools!" Self-preservation intervened, he turned, now glad of the rain, and began to walk not too quickly away. He was aware of another car accelerating...

"Bloody nuisance!" said the Prime Minister. "Hit-and-run. Any chance it was an accident?"

"No." DGI shook his head. "Someone

guessed, and put him out of the way. Hit-and-runs happen all the time, but I don't recall two cars hitting the same man. They really made a job of him."

"Well, whatever they may have concealed, I'm convinced we know the guilty parties now. I want every," the Premier stressed the last word, "every effort made to find out what they have used. Stop at nothing, even if we compromise our whole intelligence net in the area – and diplomatic relations." He looked squarely at the DGI. "You have my full authority."

Next morning a sad-faced man set out from Gatwick for what must surely have been one of the most extraordinary operations in the history of espionage. That same day another man left the calm of his Midland University for the same destination. A third

began packing an overnight bag in Vienna.

Chapter Four

Like all good plans, it was simple. The Institute, for all the recent precautions, was not, by modern standards, a high security zone. But the Director and the local Security Chief, whose main work hitherto had been tracking slogan painters, were satisfied. Communist or capitalist, it was a natural backwater, unused to the icy blasts of the cold war.

The sad-faced visitor, codename WARREN, was well aware of this, and was banking on it. Neither he nor the two men

he was to meet had any local record – two of them had never even visited the country before. Their hosts, the British intelligence organisation, were solely responsible for providing a rendezvous for them and a general briefing. Apart from that the local men were busy building cast-iron alibis for the next few days – or quietly leaving the country.

The three met, and for twenty-four hours studied their problem with great care, WARREN was, in essence, a specialist in single-mindedness. GRIGOR from Vienna was a safe and motor-car expert. MAXI's contribution was languages. All three had the basic qualifications of their Service: good training, a fair amount of courage, quick brains and no qualms.

The operation began as the first members of the Institute left in the evening. The short

southern twilight was just perceptible as WARREN slowly strolled up, carefully counting the staff as they left. At the same time the hardest part of the whole operation was being completed by GRIGOR. He had to steal a car and leave it at a predetermined point. It was not as difficult as he had expected. As he walked briskly along to join WARREN, MAXI dressed in dungarees and carrying a window-cleaner's ladder – also stolen – approached from the other end of the broad street. The timing was perfect. As WARREN walked slowly up the steps to the front door, MAXI boldly placed the ladder against the front wall and without any attempt at concealment, cut the telephone wires. By the time the door was open he was down the ladder and carrying it toward the entrance.

WARREN flashed an official-looking pass

at the guard, who did not recognise it, but the visitor had an air... WARREN tripped on the threshold, pushing the guard back as he regained his balance. It was neatly executed. To an onlooker there was nothing sinister in it, more like an episode from the Keystone Cops, WARREN stumbling, GRIGOR pushed from behind by MAXI's ladder, and all of them propelled into the hall. The guard shouted at MAXI, who shouted back. In the general confusion two fortunate members of the staff crossed the hall and left, smiling at the odd tableau. The second duty guard moved across to deal with the "window cleaner" – who had pushed the door shut behind the last two to leave with the base of his ladder. The guard had not taken more than two steps when WARREN shot him through the heart with a silenced automatic. The man spun round with the force of the bullet and collapsed twitching on the marble floor.

MAXI spoke to the first guard. "You will die too if you disobey. We want the Director – now!"

There was a faint smell of cordite; the shot man's boots scraped feebly on the floor and were still.

The shaken guard stared for a moment at his dead comrade. His gaze travelled to WARREN who had pocketed his gun, but the very stillness of his arm gave added menace to his steady, passionless stare.

WARREN and MAXI followed the dazed guard, GRIGOR dragged the body into a corner, its progress across the white marble recorded by a thin smear of blood, GRIGOR carefully selected a chair, produced a large and silenced Luger from

a shoulder holster and sat with it in his lap, under his hat.

The Director's face was a riot of emotion. Anger at their unceremonious entry gave way to amazement, blended with fear.

MAXI's tone was cold yet conversational. "We've just shot one guard, we're prepared to shoot you. Obey, and you will live. We want all the papers you have on this drug of Pavel's."

Both the intruders noted the Director's involuntary glance toward an ancient monster safe.

"Yes, you can open that, for a start!"

"I don't know what you mean!"

Without appearing to move, WARREN shot the second guard in the knee. The explosion was scarcely louder than a cork popping. The unlucky man crashed to the floor, moaning. Soon he would be screaming. With unhurried ease WARREN produced a pad from his pocket and rammed it over the man's face. The strong sweet smell of chloroform filled the room.

"Now perhaps you understand. Your help will only save time, for we will get what we want, whether you are alive or dead."

"You cannot do this..."

"You've five seconds," said MAXI calmly, "then I nod to my friend."

MAXI's cool dispassionate manner did as much to convince the Director as the sight of WARREN. The Director fumbled in his

desk, his hand shook uncontrollably. He produced a key ring and lumbered unsteadily to the safe. As the ponderous door sighed open, WARREN acted. His right arm encircled the Director's neck, his left hand pressed the chloroform pad hard on the man's face.

In another thirty-seconds WARREN was sweeping the contents of the safe into a nylon shopping bag. MAXI did the same to the desk, WARREN added the Director's wallet to his collection, then handed his incongruous bag to MAXI and nodded at the door. As MAXI left, WARREN produced a ready-filled hypodermic, the needle protected with a cork. With no hesitation he stabbed the needle into the Director's arm, giving him an intramuscular 2 cc. shot of deep sleep. The guard was served in the same way.

In the hall WARREN found GRIGOR standing casual guard over two very frightened lab assistants. The chloroform/hypodermic routine soon settled their immediate problems, GRIGOR thoughtfully made them reasonably comfortable, out of sight of the door. WARREN glanced round, paused, then nodded. They shut the front door very quietly.

Walking unhurriedly to the car, WARREN glanced at his watch. From start to finish the operation had taken five and a half minutes. There was, he reflected, time to catch the night flight to Vienna. He was looking forward to using his U.S. diplomatic passport. It was such a beautiful forgery.

The fact that there had been a raid at all was not discovered until the relief guards arrived three hours later. Even then little

could be gleaned, since none of the drugged men recovered for another four hours. By which time, literally, the raiders had flown the country.

In London the documents were quickly translated, duplicated and distributed to the centres already working on the drug. Curiously, GAYBIRD's final formula was not among the data captured, but there was enough in his lab journal to enable two laboratories independently to synthesise the drug at practically the same moment. The item in the journal that really staggered the chemists was the minute dosage regarded as effective. There was no doubt that the merest trace added to water supplies – the journal suggested this vector – would be sufficient. Routine purity tests would never show it. All the PROLOX Committee, who had worked into the early hours of the morning, were convinced that

they had completed their task. At eight a.m. Perranwell informed the Prime Minister of their findings. At once, he called a full Cabinet meeting for ten.

"Gentlemen, we know who did it and what did it. I've already ordered this morning that all suitable medical research facilities are to concentrate on the search for a cure or antidote." He looked inquiringly at Bart, who nodded. There had been some very hard talking done in his Ministry that morning. The Premier went on.

"It's too early to say much, but the PROLOX Committee's report is not very hopeful. Certainly the stuff works, that's self-evident, but I'm told that, like aspirin, they have no idea how it works. Until this is solved, there is little prospect of a cure. Anyway, I know Bart will see that nothing

stands in the way of this vital project. That is all we can do. I want to turn now to another aspect of this crisis: retaliation."

The Minister of Science, a devout Christian and a staunch pacifist, stirred uneasily in his seat and looked across at Bart. The Premier noted the unspoken protest.

"No, Devoran. Your beliefs, I'm sure, do you credit, but you are in a minority. I can assure you I'm not merely seeking revenge. I'm fully aware that this is a profitless – and dangerous emotion. But retaliate we must, partly to satisfy the nation – and there are other reasons which I prefer not to discuss at this time. The people know we have been maimed, crippled to a degree that we do not even now fully comprehend. No one in his right mind can suggest we let the crazy maniacal action of a few men go..."

"I quite agree," said Devoran, "but surely we ought to arraign them before world opinion, raise the matter in the United..."

"No! By Christ! No!" The Minister of Defence slammed his hand hard on the table. "We weren't elected to fumble around like the last lot! The nation wants positive action, not paper resolutions. Good God! Have we sunk so low we have to get the approval of Monaco, Costa Rica and similar superpowers before we defend ourselves?"

There was a general murmur of agreement. Bart caught the eye of the Premier, who nodded.

"We mustn't let ourselves be carried away," said Bart quietly. "I'm not denying the call for action. I sympathise, but can we

afford it? As I see it, this drug induces sterility, for how long we do not know. Incredibly – there's no other word for it – our water supply was doctored. *Why*, is, I think, relatively unimportant. What we must do is to concentrate all our energy..."

"Hold on, John," cut in the Prime Minister. "*Why* is not so unimportant as you think. You're too parochial in your view. We of the Defence Committee find nothing incredible in this attack. In the world today, size is the thing that counts. A China of ten million would worry no one. It's the other six hundred and ninety-million that has us scared. We consider this attack was – is – designed to destroy NATO and the very real prospect of a United States of Europe. Once it is known that the UK, now sixty-million strong, will be down to twenty million or less in the next thirty years..." There was no need to go on. The Premier

began filling his pipe. "I must add we are convinced this attack has been made without any backing or the knowledge of the USSR. It's the action of a fanatical Anglophobe and a few men."

The Chancellor broke in as clouds of blue smoke rolled slowly from the Premier. "Why are you so sure about Russia?"

"Several reasons. We know they're by no means unfriendly to the idea of a united Europe. Quite rightly they think this would lay the German bogey once and for all. They also think a USE would be on their side in any showdown with China. Anyway, if they'd done this, it would not have been just the UK – and they wouldn't have been so ham-fisted at covering their tracks. Finally, such an attack could provoke the USA, the last thing they want."

"But if we retaliate, might not we provoke the Russians?"

"No," replied the Premier decisively. "I can't overemphasise how preoccupied the USSR is with China. If we attacked Poland or East Germany, that might be a different story, but this rotten little crowd are quite unimportant to the Soviets. They know, I'm sure, what has been done to us. Our strike back will serve their book. Teach other satellites not to meddle in foreign affairs without Big Brother."

Bart spoke. "But can we spare the effort, can we risk even a small war?"

"The effort is negligible. We already know how much PROLOX we need to drench the damned country. On my orders Porton is already making soluble tablets and in a week we'll have more than

enough. War risk? Has anyone even thought of fighting them? How? Our bombers overflying the best part of Europe? Out of the question. And remember once more, the nation expects action, and the demand will grow. The last official figure the late Government gave of probable sterility was 'perhaps forty percent' – correct?"

Bart knew his hand was being forced. He nodded, but Farmer was not to be put off. "And what do you think now, John?"

"You know one cannot say, I'd rather wait until I submit my report in a few days time..."

"Have a guess," said the Premier with steely amiability.

"Well, it could be around eighty percent,

but I don't like to quote figures out of context. This is a very involved matter..."

The Premier nodded and looked sardonically round the table. "Anyone care to predict the national reaction to that one? No. We cannot wait even for the final figures. We must strike back at once."

Bart tried again. "Can't we wait a week? I don't want to go off half-cock. As yet our estimates are very rough, based on antenatal clinic and maternity hospital reports. We have to evolve a totally new sterility test. Good progress is being made. In a day or two we may be able to start batch testing, and really know the true position, which, quite frankly, I fear may be even worse. If it is, the measures I will have to put forward will be quite revolutionary and very hard for the nation to accept."

"All the more reason for action now," interposed the Premier. "If the country knows we've done all that can be done, it will at least reduce some of the uproar. I'm not merely thinking of our position as individuals, but I put it to you all; if this Government falls, what then?"

There was silence. The Premier continued in a calm, level voice. "I intend," he stressed the word, "to direct personally a small retaliatory force. I accept full responsibility." He glanced at the secretary recording the meeting. "Delete all reference to this matter from the minutes. If the situation goes bad, let me have all the blame." There was nothing mock-heroic in his manner, no attempt to strike a pose. There was silence while the Ministers grappled with what the Premier had said — and Bart's latest estimate. There was so

much to do, so much to try and do in a reeling world, that most of them were quite prepared to let the Premier act as he saw fit.

George Farmer had some insight into their minds. He smiled in a faint humourless way. "Right gentlemen, back to work!"

By the time Bart had finished in his office it was 8 p.m., and he had a lot of reading to do when he got home. Fifteen minutes later he was dropped at his door and felt that new, yet familiar lightening of the heart as he let himself in. Apart from his work, his sole interest in life was his wife. Instinct told him that this warm sense of gladness at being with her was not merely the euphoric state of a newly married man. Before they met in a draughty hospital corridor his life had been almost entirely dedicated to his work. There had been

excursions into the jungle of sex, usually of short duration. His clinical mind was keenly aware of his sense of relief, of liberation from tiresome entanglement, yet tinged with sadness at his failure to make contact with another human. To him, women were — however well they might disguise it — egocentric, calculating and full of a bright-eyed sensuality that revulsed him. Never had he found the real companionship he sought. At best his encounters had been stimulating skirmishes; at worst, demonstrations of the deep divisions that lie between individuals. He returned each time with renewed energy to his work, the only real anodyne for loneliness.

From the start Julia had been different, not that she lacked sensuality. With her he discovered how wide the spectrum of lovemaking really was, ranging from the joy of pure animal ferocity to shades of infinite

tenderness. But above all, and of far greater importance, she gave him a sense of companionship. For the first time in his remembered life he no longer felt alone.

As he entered the small hall, which doubled as a dining room, his pleasure was modified on hearing voices in the living room. He recognised the visitor as his wife's twin sister, Mary. She also had recently married a doctor, which was not all that coincidental since the sisters had both been nurses.

Neither woman moved as he entered. Julia was curled up, catlike and compact on one sofa. Mary occupied an identical position on another sofa. Fractionally, Bart compared the women. Medically, he knew that as identical twins there was virtually no difference between them. They had similar mannerisms, thought very much alike, and

read each other's mind with disconcerting ease. Yet one was the best part of life itself to him. Even as he smiled at them, he wondered what queer biochemical quirk made the difference, and if the difference lay in them, or in him...

"Hello, Mary." He did not speak to his wife, but the changed quality of his smile was enough. Bart was incapable of demonstrating his affection before others. 'Darling' was a word he seldom used, and he never kissed his wife in public. Friends went for the easy answer, said he was 'fantastically shy.'

"Darling," said Julia, who did not have the same inhibitions, "have you eaten?" She knew full well he was tired, strained and worried – and would not thank her for saying so.

"Yes. My secretary brought me a tray," said Bart, untruthfully.

"Well, I know I'm absolutely dying to eat," said Mary with great feeling. "Roger promised to pick me up half an hour ago. Medical men!" She rattled on.

Bart continued to smile faintly, trying to look attentive. He hoped her husband would not be long.

Roger did, in fact, arrive a few minutes later, full of profuse and polished apologies. He was a very polished man; a good surgeon who was even better for the urbane confidence that radiated from him. His hard, angled face was a great loss to the stage; the slightly full, cruel lips inspired even more confidence in his female patients. Bart and he had met now and then in a professional way and Bart

quite liked him, although his even tan made Bart think of sunlamps and his expensive and very masculine aftershave lotion was not quite Bart's style. All the same, Roger Flavell was no quack.

Glad of something to do, Bart quickly poured drinks and did his best to keep out of the conversation. He kept the smile going and watched – and hardly heard a word that was said. He saw his brother-in-law was very anxious to talk of other matters, but Mary was deep in the story of a carpet. Roger realised this was not the moment, finished his drink and, stopping his wife in mid-story, said they must be going.

"Thank you for the drink, John," said Roger. "If you can find time Mary and I would be delighted if you both had a bite with us one evening."

Mary laid a hand on John's arm. "Yes, you really must. I promise not to invite anyone else." Her blue eyes looked pleadingly into his. So like Julia...

"Love to," murmured John, with monumental insincerity; he loathed dinner parties.

"Marvellous! Leave it all to Julia and me. I've got the most heavenly cook..."

Bart sank into an armchair and sighed audibly. Julia regarded him thoughtfully. "No – leave that beastly dispatch case for now. We'll eat in here, on a tray..."

"I told you, I've eaten." He was wasting his time.

"— a real tray. Cold chicken, half a bottle of Hock and a peach."

Bart hardly heard. He felt relaxed, but his mind was no less busy. The higher the sterility percentage went, the more inexorably he was being driven to consider fantastic countermeasures. He thought grimly of the Premier. If he could produce his report in time, it might stop even George Farmer playing with side issues.

The intricate, cool, mathematical beauty of a Bach partita softly filled the room. Gratitude welled up in Bart at Julia's unerring choice. His mind wavered, then surrendered itself to the music.

Chapter Five

The Minister of Health would have been entirely unrelaxed had he known what was happening two miles away in Downing Street. Farmer, once more in his shirtsleeves, was presiding over a very select Defence Committee meeting. The Premier, the Minister of Defence and DGI, that was all. The small study with its gracious classical decor was an odd background; the desk was strewn with maps which overflowed onto the floor, a bottle and glasses stood on a small wine table, and a plate of ham sandwiches, the Premier's belated attempt at hospitality,

had been put on the floor, out of the way. The Minister of Defence, sunk deep in an armchair, was reading the latest staff "appreciation."

Impatiently the Premier added to the general clutter on the floor as he swept a pile of aerial reconnaissance mosaics off the desk. Some fell upside down, revealing the large red "Secret" stamp.

"That stuff's for the experts," he said by way of explanation. He fixed DGI, who was standing beside the desk, with a hard stare. "If your lot are right, only sixty percent get their water from reservoirs, the rest rely on streams and wells – correct?"

DGI nodded. "They're a backward crowd. Even in some of the towns a lot of wells and rainwater are used. We estimate eighty percent of the population live in

urban concentrations, but probably twenty percent have no piped water – hence the sixty percent."

"Hm." The Premier lit his pipe. He smoked a particularly virulent type of black shag. He stared hard at the red-ringed reservoirs on the map before him. "Well, we can't alter that. It's obvious their agents just toured our reservoirs and tossed these damned things in. Christ! Given time, one man could have done it! For all we know it was one man. I can't think of a simpler or more economical way, either, can you?"

The Defence Minister looked up. "It's either that, or we fly over and spray..." The idea was so impracticable he did not even bother to finish the sentence. The Premier did not comment, and DGI began to pick up the scattered photographs.

The Premier got up, walked across the room and stared with unseeing eyes at the portrait of Lord Palmerston. "No. There's no option, we've got to use the same method. Unfortunate, since they'll be alerted after the raid on the Institute." He abandoned Palmerston, turned and faced his small staff. "Two factors give us a slight advantage. First – we'll strike sooner than they can expect. Secondly – we'll use women to do the job."

"Women!" The Defence Minister looked like a startled owl.

DGI stopped picking up photographs and regarded the Premier with new respect. "That, sir, is a damned brilliant idea!"

Farmer's face did not alter. "I thought you'd see it."

The Minister of Defence did not care much for the unspoken criticism. "Perhaps I'm slow, but what the advantages are escapes me."

"For a start, there's novelty – surprise. But the real point is that if we have the right women, they'll do a better job – God knows they have the incentive! There are thousands of women right now who have strong suspicions they cannot have children. Among that lot there'll be hundreds to whom the prospect of children is their sole reason for living, and they'll be like ravening tigers when they know." Farmer poked carelessly around his desk for matches. "A strongly maternal woman is close to nature – she knows kids are her business – she knows too that Mother Nature produces nothing useless; yet a sterile woman with strong maternal

instincts is useless, and knows it. She feels useless – that's why some of 'em are so bitchy." He found the matches. Between puffs he continued. "Now, with sterility forced on them suddenly, some of these women are going to be wicked to deal with. Real bloody wicked."

DGI nodded. "We'll get all the volunteers from women officers in the Services. Intelligent, disciplined women who know they can never be mothers. 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned' will be nothing to this..."

But the Premier was not listening. He was on the phone to Porton. In minutes he was facing his colleagues again.

"The first batch will be ready by the morning. Not a lot, but enough for the first strike." He addressed himself to DGI. "I

want you to handle this; start collecting volunteers, now. I want the first one on the way tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night!"

"Why not? Speed is now everything. I'm damned sure you can find half a dozen before midnight. This operation ought to be completed in less than a week! Get them on coach parties, tourists, schoolteachers on holiday, anything that occurs to you. First one can fly straight in – see each one yourself – make sure they realise the dangers."

"That won't put many off," observed DGI.

"Don't you think this influx will appear suspicious?" objected the Minister of Defence.

"Influx! Dammit man, I don't suppose there'll be more than a dozen, even allowing for some duplication."

"Even so, the opposition may think it distinctly peculiar, in the circumstances, to find odd women striding around their lakes and reservoirs."

"I'd be prepared to bet there are well over a hundred Englishwomen crawling all over the remoter parts of Europe picking bloody flowers. Some travel agencies run special tours for them – whole damned coachloads of tweedy botanists – they're a stock English figure these days." The Premier waved his pipe impatiently. "Well, you'd better get on with it." He smiled in a curiously embarrassed way. "I know I'm biased, but try the Wrens first."

Second Officer Katherine Lacey-Gunn,

WRNS, was tired, but alert. The long flight — worse — the bumpy bus ride, hampered by the large botanist's collecting book, had been exhausting. Now her target lay before her, a shimmering moonlit expanse, glittering coldly through the trees.

She moved softly, startling and startled by disturbed wood pigeons fluttering clumsily through the scented pines that ended twenty, thirty yards short of the water. She hesitated, dropped the book, ran fast, crouching, unscrewing the container as she ran.

A hoarse unintelligible cry away to the left. She ran on, dropping tablets in her anxiety. Beside the water she turned, running along the edge, hurling handfuls, a black figure against the moon. Machine guns clattered viciously into life. Red, green tracer crossed and recrossed with seeming

slowness along the shore.

She fell in the act of throwing, running, and lay face down in the sweet dewy grass, smiling as she died.

Within five days fourteen women descended, by various routes, like avenging Furies on their targets. Three women were shot, two captured, but they did their job. DGI was secretly appalled by their burning zeal. These fourteen women had at least a substitute fulfilment. He pondered on the many hundreds, possibly thousands who would not have this outlet.

Chapter Six

It was on the fifth and final day of the attack that Bart was ready to report to the Cabinet. The Premier wasted little time.

"The object of this meeting is to hear Bart's report and to decide what action we must take. Right, go ahead, John."

Bart had not seen the Prime Minister since the meeting nearly a week before. He had been immersed in the frantic search for a valid sterility test, and the subsequent testing. Practically the entire gynecological

strength of the country had been engaged, and the whole operation had been a masterpiece of British improvisation. Everyone concerned was imbued with a sense of urgency and unity that produced near-miracles. Learned men who a year before were deep in bitter academic strife – and there is nothing more bitter – worked willingly together. Bart centred all activity round the new Manchester University computer. Part of the GPO's trunk service was disrupted by the emergency provision of permanently open lines and teletype links to and from Manchester. For three days and nights Bart did not leave his office, neither did his immediate staff. They directed, controlled, cleared any obstructions, channelled effort where it was most needed. At the centre of it all sat Bart, hard, taut, sustained by his convictions and the sheer weight of his responsibility. There were times when he did not know if it was night or day, and did not care.

None of this did he mention now, but the strain showed clearly in his face and his manner. He began in a slow, tired voice, describing simply the mechanics of female sterility. This, he said, was very roughly due either to the failure of the female to present her egg for fertilisation, or a physical malformation preventing fertilisation. He emphasised that he was generalising, but wanted his colleagues to understand that sterility was seldom due to a defect in the egg itself. Laboratory tests showed conclusively that PROLOX sterility was caused by the effect of the drug on the egg. Normally, an egg might be described as half-alive, waiting for the male component, PROLOX killed that female half. Normal sterility tests would not show this, hence the need for a new one. Bart looked with bloodshot eyes round the table.

"Have I made myself clear so far?"

There was a general rumble of agreement.

Bart explained that a new test had been developed. Since intelligence reports showed no one else has been affected, it was obvious that women not in the UK in the last quarter of 1971 were unaffected. The largest single group was in Germany, servicewomen and wives of the soldiers of BAOR. The testing of five hundred of these women was arranged, as a control group. Each woman was examined minutely; blood pressure, blood count, saliva, urine, breath – there were nearly a hundred items all told, all entered on the individual's punch card. These, fed to a computer, produced an average index figure, and other figures relating to this index and the marital and maternal status of the women.

At the same time a thousand women in the UK were similarly tested.

"The volume of work," continued Bart, "has been quite staggering. We have been looking for common differences between the two groups and sub-groups of each, and two significant differences have emerged. These differences have been exhaustively tested against known fertile and infertile women, and we are sure it is a reliable test. The first is a slight, but measurable difference in what we call the pH level in the reproductive organs. The level is higher in sterile women, why, we don't know, but there it is. The second difference is more bizarre, and quite beyond our understanding. Sterile women are very slightly colour-blind."

"Good God! That's fantastic!" burst out

Farmer. "The women would have noticed that themselves months ago!"

"I did say very slightly," reminded Bart. "We're doing a detailed study of this, but it appears that there are two shades of green they confuse. It is extremely slight, but any degree of colour blindness in women is rare, although very common in men, and many never know it."

"That's an inborn defect. These women, if you're right, used to see normally."

"True. There have been a few of the women who have mentioned this point themselves, but very few. It really is a very small difference. If there are, say, twenty shades of green, these women will detect eighteen, but confuse two, always the same two."

The Premier said, "Very well, we will not waste time. Where does this get us?"

"No one is infallible, but the best medical brains, not to mention three major computers, agree that this test is reliable. We have made these tests on a further five thousand women in this country, and the work is still proceeding, but we have enough to form a reasonably accurate estimate." He stopped and breathed deeply. Then, in a hard, abrupt voice: "If you accept the validity of the tests – as we of the medical world do – you must accept their results. Before PROLOX our birthrate was fifteen live births per thousand head of population. We now estimate the figure at less than one per ten thousand."

Someone began, "I don't..." Then there was complete and utter silence. No one was capable of comment. Bart, who had

lived with the growing nightmare for days, went on, "We're facing the same situation many insects have faced. DDT almost wiped out the fly population twenty years ago. A minute fraction survived, not because they missed the DDT, but because they had a natural immunity. I think that is our situation now. A few women have this immunity, the rest..." He left the sentence unfinished.

The Cabinet remained in shocked silence. There were many able brains round the table, yet no one knew what to say. The Chancellor tried.

"Well, the various Ministry studies based on a fifty percent fall will not be much use."

The sheer inadequacy of the remark deterred others. The Premier sat in his favourite position, hunched forward over

the desk. Slowly he raised his eyes, met Bart's gaze.

"Well?" There was a world of meaning in the single word. Farmer paused for a moment, then went on in a harsh voice, "So now we know the worst. Go on, Bart."

Bart's voice, too, had a sharper edge as he resumed. "Yes. We know the worst. I have lived a little longer with this situation, and I have suspected it for even longer. What I propose, no, that is the wrong word, it is action which admits of no argument." He stared steadily at the Premier. "Now you will know why I have been against any foreign adventures, any dissipation of effort, why my view is parochial." There was no trace of sarcasm in his tone.

The Prime Minister pulled at his nose, and remained silent.

"We face virtual extinction. Manchester is calculating our probable population levels for various years ahead. It is a good deal more complex than one might suppose, but it's clear we will be a nation of around five million in fifty years time. Long before that we will be in a state of fantastic imbalance. In twenty years perhaps seventy percent of the nation will be over fifty. The problems facing all of our departments are incalculable at the moment," he smiled bleakly, "except perhaps the Minister of Transport. But mine, of necessity, is the most urgent. If we do nothing, before I may reasonably expect to die, our whole population will be able to live in Birmingham. The rest of the country..." He waved a hopeless hand. "My plan will reduce the fall from something which may approach ninety-five percent to a little less than sixty percent. This is not

perfection, but in two generations we may then rebuild. Let me warn you also that in an exploding world population situation, I cannot imagine we would be allowed to keep these islands."

The Premier nodded. This was no new idea to him. "All right, Bart. We see. What's the plan?"

"This. All women of childbearing age, say fifteen to fifty, must be tested. All fertile women must be placed under the care of the state and regarded as a new and separate category. They must live in special homes, institutions, whatever you like to call them, and dedicated — indoctrinated — to the sole task of producing children."

Immediately the long Cabinet room was filled with half-formed words, ejaculations,

ranging from pure amazement to downright rejection. Bart looked angrily at his colleagues. He jumped to his feet, his chair falling unheeded on the carpet.

"Very well!" He was coldly sarcastic. "Perhaps someone would care to produce an alternative scheme – or do we just drift? Is that better? We have to act for posterity. Adopt this scheme, and posterity will criticise us. Don't adopt it, and there won't be a posterity!"

The Cabinet was silent as Bart fumbled clumsily for his chair, and sat down.

The Premier had recovered sufficiently to light his pipe. He puffed out a cloud of smoke and shot a single word at Bart. "Husbands?"

"This is the hardest part — so far. Reproduction by intercourse is essentially a hit-and-miss system. The only answer is artificial insemination. It is more certain, and no time is lost. Equally important, we ensure that we have only healthy children."

There were murmurs of protest. Bart jumped up, glared down the table. "Think! Where there were a hundred and fifty children, there'll be one! One! D'you imagine we can afford a single case of congenital disease?" He regained control and slowly sat down. "This is a new world. If we don't adapt to the new conditions, we die. With hormone treatment we can be sure of at least twins at each confinement. A hundred years ago, women had ten to fifteen children, sometimes more. I know, many died. But that was a hundred years ago. We know a lot more now, and by God, we've the incentive."

"What size family do you now expect?"
The Premier was calm.

"Given a healthy girl of fifteen, we consider thirty, perhaps thirty-five, more in some cases."

"Poor bloody woman!" said someone.

"No bloody nation if we don't!" retorted Bart. "These women will get the best possible care and live under the best conditions we can provide."

"There are other things," put in the Chancellor, mildly.

"There are endless problems, we all know that," said the Premier, "but Bart has put it squarely to us. Virtual extinction, or a

fighting chance."

"There are other measures which I will not propose now, but they will be even more distasteful."

"Such as?"

"Our present child population. I have not had time to work this out, but just consider one point. Can we afford even one avoidable road accident? Hundreds of children die and are maimed each year. That has to stop."

"As you say, that's another problem. Let's get back to the first one. Any comments?"

The Foreign Minister spoke. "Perhaps this sterility has only affected women capable of childbearing at the time of the attack. If

so, the situation, while still extremely grave, is less so in the long term."

"We thought of that," replied Bart soberly. "A special group of girls, down to the age of five has been tested. Same results. In my Ministry we are in no doubt that any female who drank water in the autumn of 1971, apart from those with natural immunity, is sterile." Bart shuffled a few papers together. "That is all I have to say, Prime Minister."

Again it was the Foreign Minister who broke the strained silence. He was one of the few really experienced politicians in the Cabinet, and widely respected as an able man. He spoke slowly, carefully. "I have sat many times at this table, heard many speeches, heard many views more cogently expressed, but I do not recall greater conviction in a man, any man, than

I have just heard. Moreover, what he has said is inescapably logical. His policy will cause great trouble, but so will any other course of action. He spoke simply and offered a seemingly simple solution – so far as there is one – to the most dreadful, most complex problem this nation has ever faced. It may be that a cure will be produced, but Bart does not appear hopeful. In any case, we cannot afford to wait. If a cure is found, then clearly we have to reconsider our actions, but until then I must say Bart has convinced me that his is the only course open to us." He looked toward the Premier.

The Premier was staring hard at his pipe, but was fully aware of the Foreign Minister's gaze. "In other days no doubt a Royal Commission would be set up to consider the whole matter. Now there is no time. I too support Bart. I intend putting this

to the House, in secret session, tomorrow. If we get the majority approval, which I don't doubt, we will put the policy in hand as soon as details can be worked out. It can be done by Order-in-Council. John, I want you to state the case, just as you've done to us. I'll wind up – agree?"

It was a great personal triumph, but Bart neither appreciated that, nor would have cared had he known. Convinced of the correctness of his policy, he was blind to all other considerations. There was no alternative.

Bart's triumph was repeated the next day in the House. Again it was his personal sincerity that affected members, for he was no orator. The general debate that followed was not notable; many members were too shocked to say anything, and most were only too eager to follow any leadership that

offered some answer to the crisis. Some said the policy smacked of totalitarianism – the PM soon dealt with them. Only one seemed to appreciate that they were dealing with a problem that could be personal.

This lone MP jumped up, pointed at the Premier and cried, "And you, sir! How will you feel if your wife or daughter has to go?"

It was a splendid opening for a grand answer in the Roman manner, but that was not George Farmer's way. "Sir, if my wife has to go, I'll be the most surprised man in England! As for my daughter, if she has to go, then she damned well goes."

The majority was over five hundred and fifty. Farmer was satisfied, and announced that he intended to address the nation the

following evening. He added that there was another matter that might be more to their liking, which he would save until then.

But Bart was not in the House to speculate on what the Premier meant. Immediately after the Division, he left for his office. When asked in the House where accommodation could be found at short notice for these women, he had replied, almost without thinking, that the holiday camps would do for a start. Walking back to his office he realised this really was a good idea. Psychologically and practically it was a good answer. No one could possibly grumble at being sent to a holiday camp.

The Premier was very pleased with Bart's performance. So much so, he made the snap decision that Bart should present the policy to the nation on TV, then Farmer

would speak himself. Apart from a few in the Ministry of Defence, no one knew of the retaliatory strike. News of this, suitably wrapped up, would sugar Bart's bitter pill. Bart was unhappy at the Premier's decision, but had to accept it; as Farmer pointed out, it would come with more authority from a doctor.

Technically, Bart's performance was terrible. He began by reading from notes, lost his place, ignored the cue board and finally spoke extempore – which was the best thing he could have done. The TV eye is quick to detect the phony; Bart's talk – it could not be called a speech – really got across. The producer, who had never had the slightest interest in women, and was therefore able to regard the performance with some personal detachment, was wildly enthusiastic.

Farmer's address was brief and workmanlike. "I asked Doctor Bart to present our policy to you because I knew he could do it better than I could. I will only add this. These women must know in their heart of hearts, that great as the sacrifice is, it is our only hope. In the past, the men of these islands have been called upon to fight and die for their country. Now it is the turn of some of our women; not to fight and die, but to live and give life to the very future of our land." The Premier paused deliberately. "We were elected to save the nation. You know the old system, good as it was, could not cope. The many problems that face us are entirely new, the solutions too will be new and revolutionary. Many will be very hard upon us all and, of necessity, harder on some than others. I give you my assurance that I will carry out these measures without regard to any personal or minority interests. The sole yardstick is — is this necessary for the survival of our

people? If the answer is yes, then whatever it is will be done. Nothing, no one, will be allowed to stand in the way. Make no mistake about that. I will try to keep you all informed of our progress, but there is much you must take on trust. In war you do not expect the Government to reveal its secrets. In a way, this is war of a new and terrible kind. One thing I can tell you. We now know what caused this catastrophe, we know who is responsible. Again, I give you my personal assurance that they have been dealt with." The Premier smiled; it did nothing to soften his expression. "More than that I will not say, but time will show the truth of my words." He hunched forward, stared with great intensity into the camera. "Remember now, remember always, we work not for gain or personal aggrandisement, but for the very life of our nation."

Bart, who had left Downing Street as soon as he had finished speaking, missed all this. Orders-in-Council, effective that morning, had given him powers which exceeded those given grudgingly to earlier governments in wartime. It was now an offence for a woman to avoid the test, or to conceal a fertile woman. MOH test centres were to be set up at once in all suitable hospitals and clinics throughout the land, and all women between fifteen and fifty had a month in which to present themselves at their nearest centre for testing. All pregnant women were to report immediately to the nearest MOH centre.

Bart's Ministry organised feverishly. He had urgent talks with the Minister of Defence which resulted in the loan of eight hundred Service doctors to man the centres. In addition, Bart borrowed communications equipment and staff to set up his own

control net. All this he had agreed on the telephone before the Premier had ended his speech on TV. Within an hour teletypes, spares and reserves from the Ministry of Defence, were being carted into the conference hall by a squad of guardsmen, hastily summoned from Wellington Barracks. With this in hand, Bart turned his attention to another matter. Several holiday camps were requisitioned, their owners told they had a week to clear all guests out, and that in future they would operate them solely for the MOH. Regional controllers had to be found – these were ready-made, the local medical officers of health – but at that time of night it was not all that easy.

By midnight Bart had teletype links, via the Ministry of Defence, to most towns. Additional cover was given by another link with the police network. A map room was

set up in the room adjoining his office; coloured pins, flags, dotted the land, marking progress. At the centre of it all Bart sat, directing, making decisions, overriding objections and, when the pressure eased for a moment, trying to think ahead. There was so much to arrange. The provision of tested semen for example... He foresaw that there might be trouble at the holiday camps, women trying to get out perhaps, certainly there would be husbands trying to get in. He rang the Home Secretary about police protection; there he got no help. All the police were fully engaged. Minor demonstrations had already taken place in one or two cities; there were bound to be more, bigger ones. Riots, maybe. Sorry. Wearily Bart rang the Ministry of Defence again. He was dimly aware that his secretary told him his wife had phoned, but there was not time. Cups of coffee regularly arrived on his desk, and as regularly were taken away again,

untouched, cold and scummy.

Sometime after midnight the Prime Minister rang. He said Bart's talk had gone over pretty well, judging by first reports. Yes, he knew about the demonstrations — there had been a small one in Downing Street — but that was nothing. Bound to happen. Had Bart heard his speech? No? Well, then, he had better know that he had announced, in very general terms, that the strike back had been made.

Twenty-four hours earlier Bart would have been near losing his temper at the news, but now...

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said shortly.

"Don't worry, I do." The Premier sounded

very confident. "I've told you before, your view is too parochial. Just now that is no bad thing. Anyway, even if you're not all that keen, some aren't dragging their feet. Had a very successful meeting with the Press Lords — they'd got damn' restive under the last lot's shower of D notices. What progress have you made?"

Bart told him.

"Let's hope no one in the Army breaks a leg in the next few weeks."

"It'll be just too bloody bad, won't it!" Bart flared up at the suggestion of criticism.

"All right, John, don't take it too much to heart. Take a tip from me, try not to get so personally involved. You can't take the whole load on your back. If you do, you'll be crushed, can't afford that just now.

We've a damned long row to hoe, John; pace yourself for the job. Go and get some sleep, you'll be all the better for it in the morning. Good night."

Bart knew he was right. The control room was being manned by senior members of his staff night and day. If anything really urgent cropped up, they could call him. The communication centre, for all its confusion of cheap trestle tables, teletypes, cables and teacups had, naturally enough, a strong military air. Bart found this reassuring.

All the same, it was nearly two o'clock before he reached home. He was surprised to see a light in the living room. He remembered his secretary saying Julia had phoned, and felt guilty.

She was standing in the middle of the

room, waiting. Her face was tense, set. For a brief moment they stared at each other like strangers, then she rushed across and flung herself into his arms.

"Julia, my dear — what — why did you stay up?" As he spoke he realised that the past few hours had been a shock for her too, now he was facing the same problem that thousands of husbands would have — or already had. They had never discussed children; there had been so little time. Reticent by nature, it was not a subject he could talk of lightly. He had hoped they would get away together for a belated honeymoon. Then would be time enough. Now...

"What can I say, my dear? What is there to say? There've been many, many happy childless couples. This situation is not new — it's only the great numbers that are

affected that is different, and that does not add to our personal loss." He held her tightly. "Anything I say is hopelessly inadequate..."

"God, John, you don't understand!" She raised her tearstreaked face from his chest, her eyes wide with fear. She was near hysteria and her voice rose almost to a scream. "I'm pregnant. Pregnant!"

Chapter Seven

Somehow Bart got to the office the next morning. In the early hours he had managed to get Julia to bed, and with the aid of a sleeping tablet, to sleep. He spent the remainder of the night in fitful dozing, jerking awake with half-remembered nightmares. At eight o'clock he finally gave up, showered and dressed. He was reasonably sure she would sleep until about ten, and decided to pay a quick call to the office and be back before she woke. He phoned for his car as he dressed. On the way he feverishly ran over the thoughts of the night. Perhaps he could conceal her,

get a cottage in the country... abortion, that was more feasible, with his brother-in-law's help as anesthetist... or resign, get her abroad. He remembered the standstill order on all women, his own strict orders to all ports, sea and air. He tried to evaluate the possibilities, he could not lose Julia...

His mind was as chaotic as a battlefield when he reached the Ministry. Fortunately he was besieged by a host of problems; decisions were required and for nearly an hour he was too busy to consider Julia. He worked, one eye on the clock, with cold desperation. Then, quite abruptly, he told his slightly amazed staff he was going out for an hour. His car was waiting, and little more than ten minutes later he was home again. Julia was awake and up, drifting aimlessly round their bedroom. He took her shoulders, forced her gently into a chair.

"Now, you must listen carefully, my dear." He glanced at his watch. "I've no right to be here. Listen carefully. You're in a state of shock, not fit to do anything. I'll give you a sedative. Have a bath, stay in and rest. Above all, you must not talk to anyone. No one, not even Mary. This is vital. I know it'll be hard for you – I'll ring you later on this morning, but, believe me, it is essential. We must have time to think, and just now I have none. If I can get back for lunch, I will, but don't go out to get anything. Mrs. Humphries will be in, let her get it – say you're not feeling well. You understand?"

Her gaze was listless, wandering, but she nodded.

"Good. Have that bath, and try to eat something. Don't forget, no talking." He smoothed her hair, kissed her.

On the way back he tried to think of other things, forcing his mind off personal problems. He studied the streets, the crowds. It all looked so normal, yet out there must be many in the same situation. But not quite, he told himself. They had no option.

There was a message that the PM wanted to see him as soon as convenient. Bart decided the PM must wait until he had a firm grasp of the situation as it now was – and a firmer grasp of himself. The duty controller told him that twenty test centres would open at midday and a further hundred would be in operation in the next twenty-four hours.

"You may like to know, Minister, the first four – apart from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, will be in London.

St. George's, St. Thomas', Westminster and Hammersmith General."

"Good," said Bart. His voice was dull, flat. The controller looked at him with guarded curiosity. Bart pulled himself together. "Very good. How is the certificate production?"

Each woman when tested would receive a certificate. Bart had been concerned at the risk of forgery, and one of the many rush jobs he had ordered was the production by the Bank of England of unnumbered ten-shilling notes, printed on one face only. The other side had spaces for the woman's name, address, description and code number. In one month's time it would be an offence for a sterile woman not to possess one of these. Bart learnt that the printing and distribution were going well. The overworked Service helicopters – they had

spent much of the past day and night ferrying Service doctors to their posts – were largely engaged in flying the blanks to regional controllers, who would be responsible for their local distribution – and security.

Bart thought of Julia, perhaps if he got a certificate... His disciplined mind urged him not to panic. There was time, plenty of time. He wrenched his mind away from his wife. He must see the PM. He waved aside a harassed civil servant, labouring heavily under unwonted responsibility, charged with the production of vast quantities of litmus paper for the pH test, with a brusque "Use my name – fix it!"

Bart the Minister was well satisfied with the way things were going. There seemed to be more people in the streets, yet although his face had filled millions of TV screens

the night before, he was not aware of being recognised. There was a crowd, silent and orderly, in Downing Street. Bart pushed his way through, almost oblivious of the people round him, his mind filled with the bitter irony of his position. He realised that but for Julia he would be feeling almost happy.

Farmer seemed curiously diffident. He waved Bart to a chair, offered him a cigarette, forgetting he did not smoke. There was even the hint of a smile on his lined face. It increased Bart's sense of unease.

"Well," said Farmer, "you don't look as if you took my advice last night."

"Oh, I got home around two," said Bart, wearily, "but it was difficult to sleep."

"Trouble with the wife?" Farmer spoke casually, but his words went through Bart like an electric shock.

"No! Why should there..." Bart stopped, realising the utter absurdity of his answer. "Well, yes. Naturally, I've not discussed Ministry matters with her. The first she knew about it all was the TV broadcast. Came as something of a shock and she was rather upset. She was still awake when I got in."

"I hope she's fit this morning?"

Bart was puzzled by this interest. In his short experience of the PM he had not known him to indulge in light chat. Bart forced a smile. "As we say in the profession, she is as well as can be expected in the circumstances."

"Which is?" pursued Farmer. This was not light chat.

Bart stared back. "She is in a state of shock – like a good many more, I expect." A bold front was best. "I don't get what you're driving at."

"No? Well, let me put it this way." The Premier fumbled with his tobacco pouch, peered into it, sniffed. Bart suddenly realised Farmer was embarrassed.

"Dammit, I'll come straight to the point. Frankly, I'd hoped you'd volunteer, still... Point is this; we've no idea how people are going to react to this testing order. Maybe they'll turn up in droves, maybe we'll have to do a house-to-house collection in Black Marias. No one knows, but it is obvious we must set a good example."

Bart felt his heart thumping; he tried to remain impassive, but it was clear what was coming.

Farmer continued. "I'm the obvious choice, but everyone knows my wife is damned near fifty and a thousand-to-one-against bet. Daughter is different, but a daughter's not a wife. I'm taking both of 'em myself to the Westminster as soon as it opens — complete with TV coverage. If you took your wife it would have even greater impact. She's young, attractive, and the wife of the man controlling the whole thing. See my point?"

Only too clearly Bart saw his point. Sooner than he had expected he had to make a decision. The moment had arrived, and there was no doubt in his mind.

"I'm damnably sorry, George; I agree it's a fine idea, but I'm afraid my wife is really not up to it at the moment. It's an ordeal for any woman, but to do it in the face of all that publicity and smile is, I'm sure, quite beyond her right now." He shrugged. "You're right, it'll have to be done, but not just yet. It would do us no good at all if she collapsed in front of the cameras." Bart was surprised at his own fluent easiness. "In any case, we may need it as a boost in a week or so."

"Right." Farmer did not attempt to argue, and clearly took Bart's word without question. "You know best."

Bart hated himself. "As soon as she's fit, I'll arrange it."

"Of course." Farmer had dismissed the matter from his mind – for the time being.

"How are you progressing?"

Bart gave a resume of the situation, glad to change the subject, to quell his nagging conscience. The Premier listened carefully and without comment until Bart had finished.

"Um. Sounds all right, John. As I say, we don't know what response we'll get. Many may have to be taken by force. Police can't do it. Bad mistake. Must have a special corps of women health police – all known sterile women – it'll give some of them something to do, and they'll be keen to see others don't escape. I've told the Home Secretary to start recruiting – on behalf of the MOH – can't have them working under him, look too much like part of the police machine. They'll be yours, but run on police lines. I've ordered a stiffening of service and police women to be drafted in

so you get a going concern. We'll dress them to resemble the WRVS. MOH Service will do as a name, unless you can think of a better one. Establish liaison with the HS on all this. There's nearly a month before they'll be needed to operate. Have to be damned careful at first, don't want to lose public goodwill, but it must be seen that we're prepared to enforce our decisions. At the end of the month we'll pick some area – Mayfair's a good one, show right from the start there's no class distinction – cordon part of it off, check all the women we find and gently persuade the backsliders. Iron hand in velvet glove approach. Anyway, take them in for checking. Full publicity, and announce that there will be a few 'days of grace' for women still to come forward. Yes, Mayfair's a damned good choice, unless we do your part of the world; that's pretty socially OK."

Bart returned the faint smile. "Mayfair is a better name. This MOH Service; you know, I don't like the private army aspect."

"Obviously, but the MOH is going to be a very big power in the land, you're too close to realise just how big. Your Service will have powers of arrest – limited of course – but all the same they'll be your private army, like it or not. Duties will expand. We've not got to the problem of the existing children. That will be a shocker. You'll need all the help you can get."

Bart let the last part pass unheeded. Clearly the Service was necessary. The police would have little stomach for the job, and it would be easier for women, vaguely reminiscent of the WRVS, to induce other women to do their duty. Mentally he winced at the word duty.

"What is it, John?" The Premier's voice was unusually soft.

"Oh, nothing in particular. It's just that there's so much to think about."

Farmer gave the short bark that passed for a laugh with him. "You should try this seat! I'm having a hell of a time with the US and NATO, and there are endless minor repercussions. Export of gin has stopped dead. Scotch is still going – it's well known that the stuff exported was made six or seven years ago, but there are signs that that market too is collapsing. Bit of luck that the City is solidly behind us. One thing they can't stand is uncertainty. Whatever else, we're not that! The tourist graph is falling so fast it makes you dizzy. There's a discreet cordon sanitaire building up round us, John – and this is only a beginning." He shook his head. "I've any number of things

in hand that you don't know about, and there isn't time to waste telling you. Your job is to rebuild, mine to hold the ring while you do it."

Julia was in a better state of mind when John got home for a snack lunch. She seemed to have made up her mind that John would be able to arrange things. She almost made light of the matter and her swift change of attitude irritated Bart.

"You don't seem to realise a damned thing about this situation, Julia!" He told her about the Premier's suggestion that she should set an example. That really shook her. He told her that the only hope she had of avoiding the net was to have an abortion and for him to forge a certificate for her. She dare not take the test. The colour part might be faked, but not the pH test. The feeling of angry impatience her attitude had

engendered made him speak plainly, with none of his earlier efforts to explain it gently to her. "Finally, you must know that when the abortion is performed, you'll have to be sterilised at the same time. If you had a child later... well, you think about it." It was a thoughtful and somewhat frightened Julia he left a few minutes later.

For the next three days Bart had little time to consider his wife. The response to the test order was not exactly overwhelming, but there was a steady flow. For publicity purposes Bart had to visit some of the local centres, facing a barrage of cameras and thrusting microphones. Inevitably he was asked if his wife had taken the test. No, she was not very well, nothing serious, but not yet fit enough to go out. Watching the thin trickle of women, Bart was torn by conflicting emotions. Girls, mothers, incipient old maids; he wondered what

motivated them. Was it sheer docility or real patriotism or a desire to know the worst? He thought of Julia. She had not, in their little time together, referred to the conversation of three days earlier. She implied that the problem was his, and seemed to be quite unaware of the dichotomy within him. Vainly he looked for some hint from her, but there was none. Deliberately she was holding herself in, the decision must be his. There were occasional glimpses of the loving, frightened Julia behind the façade; in these moments he would cheerfully have given everything for her happiness, but the moments did not last, she retreated into herself, and all too soon his conscience nagged with renewed force. His mind revolved endlessly, always returning to abortion as the only solution. He dreaded talking to his brother-in-law, but he resolved to do it. Suddenly it occurred to him that as Julia was fertile, there was a strong

possibility that Mary might be too. It was the first break in his mental vicious circle. At once he arranged to see Roger that evening.

Flavell's consulting room could be described as splendid in a lush, yet austere manner. On the first floor of his Harley Street home, it showed none of the trappings of medical science. There was no desk, no instrument cabinet. Even the examination couch was banished to a back room. The carpet was pearl grey, there was a comfortable armchair or two, a genuine antique drum-top table, a tall inlaid mahogany bookcase. Two long windows diffused a soft light through nylon net curtains, flanked by midnight-blue velvet curtains. The Wedgwood walls were bare except for a restful Morisot river scene over the white Adam fireplace, and a very attractive Tanagra figurine in an illuminated

alcove. The rest of the lighting was in the ceiling cornice. Specialists' patients are usually scared. The room was designed to back up Flavell, and reduce tension.

Even Bart, well versed in the minor arts of medicine, was impressed. He noted with surprise, tinged with envy, that there was no telephone. To his professional mind the inference was clear. A patient was seeking Flavell's brain, not a white-coated technician surrounded by the daunting apparatus of modern medicine. Roger Flavell went up several points in his estimation.

As always, Flavell was beautifully dressed, yet no dandy. A plain dark grey suit, white shirt and stiff collar that looked as if it had just been put on, and a plain dark blue tie. The whole effect was to concentrate attention on that strong suntanned face.

Bart, the despair of his tailor, felt quite scruffy.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, John – minor crisis in the lab – you know." He did not attempt to shake hands, but waved Bart to a chair. "Still, I should have been here."

Flavell's apologies were almost extravagant in the circumstances. Bart had hardly been waiting more than a minute. Then he realised that under cover of all this, both men were now seated and the ball was very clearly on his side. All part of the system, thought Bart. Fie hunted round for a suitable opening.

"It's very good of you to see me at such short notice." It was a shocking start, and both men knew it.

Flavell raised a well-kept hand in protest. "Really, John, you sound like an anxious patient."

"I live and breathe Ministry these days, it takes time to adjust." Just to show he was not yet adjusted, he went on, "How's Mary bearing up?"

Flavell laughed and shook his head. "You think you know something about your wife, and it's reasonably easy to predict reactions to a given set of circumstances... After your brilliant performance on TV – Farmer knew what he was doing when he left the job to you – I'd expected a raging crisis, but she took it all very calmly. Said a few complimentary things about you, added that she thought you were quite right, and then announced she was going to take a bath – and would I please stop using her talcum powder! If she wanted to

play it that way, I wasn't going to press her. I thought she wanted time to think, it seemed reasonable. For the past two or three days she has appeared quite normal, no obvious signs of tension, but also no desire to talk about it. Last night she was much the same when I got in, said she deserved a large drink, and did I think she should have it framed – and produced one of your damned certificates. She'd gone off to the Middlesex and taken the test that afternoon – just like that!"

Bart's stomach felt like a solid block of concrete. He tried a half smile. "Good for her! How do you think she's really taking it?"

"I would describe it as shockingly well," replied Flavell. "In fact, I suspect it was a bigger blow to me than her. Now that she had crossed the Rubicon, so to speak, she

was quite prepared to talk. She said she had always dreaded the thought of having children and at best thought that raising a family was a very considerable bore. In fact she was heartily relieved. Even wanted to know if I thought the test was reliable enough for her to stop using the pill!"

"You can give my view as your second opinion — there's no doubt at all about its reliability. I don't know whether one commiserates or congratulates, but give her my regards. I only hope the rest of our women face it as well." Bart could not ask him now; while there had been the chance that they were in the same predicament he could stifle his professional feelings, and conscience, but not now. For a while he was silent, thinking frantically.

"Roger, as Minister, I have to be damned careful. People infer God knows what from

the most trivial action or word. This experimental work, implanting fertilised ova in a sterile female. I see the official research reports, of course, but naturally they're a little biased. I'd like to know a good deal more about it, but there isn't the time, and, as I say, if I show too much interest it may raise hopes needlessly. I'd be grateful if you unofficially looked into it. You know a lot of the people involved."

"I'd be delighted. I know old Fotherington very well – I was house surgeon under him at one time – and he's knee-deep in the subject. There's nothing easier."

"I know there's been some success with mice and hamsters. Quite frankly I'm very doubtful about the human application, but we cannot afford to miss anything now."

"Give me two or three days."

"Splendid. Give me a call when you're ready to talk. At home, not the office." John stood up abruptly. "You'll forgive me, but I have to get back."

Flavell said casually, "I don't wish to pry into state secrets, but is it permitted to disclose how the testing is going?"

"It's not exactly secret, but we're not publishing anything yet. I can tell you as a fellow doctor. The reaction's fair. Something around ten to fifteen percent have taken the test. Results are in line with the last predictions, a ninety-five percent — plus — fall in fertility."

Flavell grimaced. "It really is that bad. It must be some small comfort to you that it completely justifies your policy, but I don't envy you."

"Neither do I."

Something in Bart's voice made Flavell look at him sharply. They were on the doorstep now, the black Ministry car waiting. Flavell spoke.

"Farmer certainly made a splash with his wife at the Westminster, didn't he?"

"Yes." Bart's tone was flat. "I look forward to hearing from you."

Bart's tortured mind was further burdened by Flavell's last remark. He remembered also that Flavell had not asked after Julia; did he suspect? Had Julia told Mary – or had Mary guessed? He tried to tell himself it was imagination, plus a bad conscience. Once more he found he was regarding

himself with near hatred. Coward! He should have told Flavell, but the news about Mary was the last straw, he couldn't do it. Yet he must arrange an operation — soon. Unbidden, the thought rose in his unwilling mind that he would have to destroy his only chance of having a son. He disliked himself still more for what he regarded as unfaithfulness to Julia. It was a relief to get back to work.

The control room was running smoothly. Every two hours all centres reported the number of women tested; these figures fed to a small computer gave the percentage of the potentially fertile population tested to date, and other statistics. Bart was interested only in the percentage. The latest was 16.8 percent; clearly the first rush was over. True, there was nearly another three weeks to go, but the figure was disquieting... He was aware his

secretary was speaking.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't listening – what did you say?"

"There have been two messages asking you to ring your home."

Julia. He had a mental picture of her laughing... it was an age since he had seen her smile. If only it had been Mary that was pregnant, if only...

"Get my wife on the phone will you?"

He watched the efficient Miss Parkins dial the number and wondered idly if she had been tested, but it was "not done" to inquire. She passed the phone to him.

"Julia?"

It was a man's voice that answered. Bart frowned. "Who's that?"

The voice disregarded his question. "I think you know who this is, John. I want you to come home – now."

Bart felt sick. His hand shook as he replaced the phone. He knew who had spoken. George Farmer.

Chapter Eight

Bart dismissed his car in the Cromwell Road. Light rain was falling, and for a time he watched the never-ending torrent of cars, staring at the sharp tire marks as they were made on the wet road, marks that vanished swiftly, only to be replaced in a few seconds by others. He breathed deeply; he must not panic. Red tail and brake lights, busy amber trafficators glittered brilliantly in the rain. Hundreds of lights, pouring along, a regiment of mechanical fireflies. Yet if I could be here in fifty years, thought Bart, just fifty years... He turned through the stucco arch of the

mews. A sudden burst of laughter from a neighbour's house accentuated a growing sense of loneliness. The hiss and roar of the traffic diminished to a steady rumble; somewhere there was a screech of brakes, a tinkle of broken glass. All round him a teeming city, a dying city unless he and his kind acted with dispassionate ruthlessness... Farmer. Once more he told himself he must not panic, but a bad conscience is a worse sedative.

He let himself in quietly, hung up his coat and hat. He was quite calm now, ready. It was an unpleasant surprise to find Farmer alone in the living room.

"Where's Julia?" said Bart without preamble.

"She's in bed."

"In bed! Is she ill?" Bart turned, "I'd better take a look..."

"No!" Farmer moved swiftly, gripped his arm. "Let her be. She's had a hot drink and a sleeping tablet."

"Look – what the hell's going on?" Bart cried.

Farmer shook his head slowly, "It's no good, John – I know all about it. She told me."

"I said the other day she was unwell, what on earth has she been saying?"

"Don't go on, John. It's a waste of time – and that's the one unforgivable sin these days." He walked across to the drinks table. "I took the liberty of helping myself."

He poured two large Scotches. "Here. Sit down."

Bart took the glass. Although he was virtually certain the game was lost, he still felt calm. Both men sat down. Bart looked into his glass, this was not happening to him, it must be a dream; sitting drinking in his own house with the Prime Minister, and Julia in bed...

"D'you mind if I smoke?"

Bart nodded impatiently. "What's she been saying?"

Farmer put his drink on the floor beside his chair, and began slowly filling his pipe. "I've not been impressed by the response to the test order. We both know that a good many will have to be compelled to take the test,

but that is going to be a damned nasty business. We've got to get as many women tested voluntarily..."

"Voluntarily!" Bart gave a bitter laugh.

Farmer was unmoved. "You know what I mean. At the present rate we'll have to compel half the female population. Just won't do. They must be given a lead. My effort with my wife was laughable really, she's only three months inside the upper age limit. That cut little or no ice. There's the Chancellor's second wife — she's around thirty-five — and I decided to see her first. Did that. Then I came here." He picked up his glass, never taking his gaze off Bart. "I was pretty certain you'd not pressed her. She's young, and I thought she might not see the full implications — or the importance — of her position. I put it to her quite straight, pointing out that apart

from her duty to her country, there was her duty as a Minister's wife, that her action could ease the load on you..."

"You'd no damned right..."

"I had every right!" Farmer was unruffled. "Anyway, she burst into tears, said the strain was intolerable, told me the whole story of her pregnancy. I'm an old hand as a father. Got her off to bed, and that's all." Farmer leaned forward. "Don't try to kid me, John. She was telling the truth, don't waste time."

There was relief as well as weariness in Bart's voice, "Yes. It's true. These past few days..."

"I can imagine." Farmer's tone was rough but not unkind.

"You may as well know the rest," went on Bart. "Quite simply, I love and need my wife. If I've done any service to the country in the past few weeks, repay it by allowing me to resign and arrange an operation. No one need know..."

"No!" There was cold finality in the Premier's voice. "You're not the only man who loves his wife! You don't seem to realise that she loves you too, that for that very reason she wants to have your child. I know you're in a hell of a situation, but stop thinking about yourself for a moment and consider her. Never mind the larger – and more important – national considerations. She wants to have your child because she loves you, because she knows you want children, and because she knows that children are a good half the reason for getting married. She tried to leave the

decision to you and would have done whatever you thought best, but in her inner conviction there was only one real answer for her, you – and the nation. I don't doubt you know every damned inch of the female body, John, but what you know about their minds, their desires is damn all. They're a realistic and tough lot, women. Have to be. You're a clever, dedicated man. Good brain, good organiser. But compared with your wife, when it comes to the facts of life, you're a babe in arms – and just about as selfish."

"You see everything in black and white," protested Bart defensively, "it's not like that. The unimaginable hell of..."

"You're right; I do see things in black and white. Not because I don't know about the grey in between, but because it's the only way we can look at life now. I've no doubt

your conscience has given you hell, but you've been so wrapped up in it you've overlooked that your wife has one too. No, it's no good arguing, John. She's decided. She's going to have that baby — and accepts all that implies." He paused, put down his glass with a bang. "And you're not going to resign, either."

"Good God, man!" cried Bart, "d'you imagine..."

"No, John. Mr. Farmer is right. We — of all people — must go through with it, and you cannot resign."

Julia, her dressing gown wrapped loosely round her was standing in the doorway. She looked pale and very young, but there was no doubt about the determination in her voice.

"Julia, my dear," Bart started up, "you're too tired to talk now. Leave all this till the morning." He took her hands gently, "Come on, back to bed."

"It's no good, darling. I've made my mind up. Even if we could arrange an operation, there would come a time when you would think less of me..."

"No!" cried Bart vehemently. But he remembered his feelings, watching the queue at the test centre...

Farmer took charge. "Go back to bed, Mrs. Bart." He was gentle but firm. "John, pour me another drink, will you?"

Bart looked from his wife to Farmer and back again. She smiled faintly and nodded. She reached up and straightened his tie. "Go on, darling. There are some

sandwiches in the kitchen." There was a new confidence in her, born of relief. Bart saw a very private smile in her eyes, a smile he had not seen for many days. She said very softly, "I didn't take that sleeping pill."

Bart felt exceedingly small. Farmer was right, he had been selfish. Julia squeezed his hand, and was gone. He turned to face Farmer, uncertain what to say.

The Prime Minister was just replacing the telephone. "Never mind that drink, John. I've ordered a car to pick me up outside the V and A. Walk'll do me good. Come and see me at ten tomorrow." His brisk voice softened, "You're over the first hurdle. Won't be easy for either of you, but I doubt if it will be as bad as you expect."

Bart was not convinced.

The Prime Minister extracted the last drop out of the Barts' situation. He had a good PRO and briefed him well. The story was not overdone, Julia Bart was not made a heroine. The handouts plugged the angle that this was a woman who knew her duty. Bart refused to allow her to appear on TV, but there were interviews with newspapers. These "human interest" articles all brought out the point that Julia knew beyond doubt that position counted for nothing, all fertile women must do their duty, etc. Julia was amazed at what she was supposed to have said. Bart refused to comment at all, but that did not stop the PRO. The Minister, it appeared, agreed with his wife, painful as it was to them both. Phase two of the campaign was less obvious. Without actually saying so, it was hinted that Bart was a man of iron resolve. The moment he

knew his wife's condition, he had gone straight to the Premier. The word "duty" was rather overworked for a time. The inference was clear, and made clearer as the month progressed. Bart would not even get his wife off the hook – and after all, he was a doctor – and Bart certainly would not let anyone else get away with it. Bart's public image began to resemble a cross between Abraham and Bismark.

By the end of the second week the percentage had crept up to twenty-seven. In the third week the Bart campaign was going full blast, and the figure rose to just over fifty percent. The exhortations to be tested, which hammered out ceaselessly through all media, took on a new note. There was less coaxing, more emphasis that "time is running out." More publicity was given to the MOH Service. Grey-green Minis, with "MOH" in red on the sides were

to be seen... These letters began to mean something to the public – not as sinister as MI5 – but not as homely as BBC. By the end of the month seventy-eight percent of the estimated female population between fifteen and fifty had been tested. Farmer was well pleased.

To his immediate associates, Bart had changed little, but there was a new brusqueness in his manner, he was less ready to listen. He worked with tireless energy, his orders came sharp and to the point. Slowly he began to resemble his public image...

Roger Flavell's report on what he called 'pre-natal adoption' was not very favourable. It still might be possible. Experimentally it worked reasonably well with certain animals, but there had been a total failure so far with humans. The project

had not lived up to its early promise, and it was Flavell's opinion that while it might, like skin grafts from one person to another, work in a few cases, he did not think it likely that this would prove an answer to the nation's problem. It crossed Bart's mind, that Mary, as an identical twin, might be able to accept a fertilised egg from Julia.

Superficially, Bart's home life was much as before, but there was an underlying tension, a desperate eagerness to live each moment to the full together, but there was so little time. Bart arranged for his wife to share his office lunch with him. It was seldom that he could spare more than half an hour, even that was worth it. Julia would chatter about anything and everything – except the future. If it had not been for the pressure of work, Bart thought he would, at times, go mad.

One matter that engaged his attention in the last ten days of the test month was the first house-to-house search. The first MOHS group had been organised, given what training was possible, and transferred to his control. As proposed by the Premier, Mayfair was the target. The area east of Grosvenor Square was selected, as this avoided most of the hotels and the embassy quarter. It was mainly a business zone, and sparsely populated on Sunday, the day chosen for the operation. This was deliberate. It gave experience to the MOHS on a relatively easy target, and there was the publicity value of the name Mayfair.

At precisely nine o'clock on a quiet Sunday morning, police cars and vans, together with some two hundred of the MOH Service in their Minis and utility vans, converged on the area from several

directions. The police sealed all exits, gleaming barriers fresh-painted and marked "MOH Control" were quickly in place. Brook Street was tackled first as it contained the largest target – and biggest headache – Claridges Hotel, and Bart wanted to get that one over before the Press got wind of the operation. Police cars parked conspicuously in the middle of the road as a specially briefed party of fifty green-grey clad Servicewomen entered the hotel, accompanied by a police inspector. The manager nearly died of shock, but had no option but to assist. The drill laid down was quite simple. Any woman unable to produce a certificate was "requested" to accompany a MOH Servicewoman to St. George's Hospital for an immediate test. Bart waited impatiently in the operation HQ, set up in Savile Row police station. He relaxed slightly when Claridges was dealt with. His force had orders to be extremely diplomatic with the many foreigners staying

there. Bart had no wish to go around apologising to ambassadors.

There were very few incidents. In a private house in Brook Street a woman resisted, and was carried, kicking and screaming out of her house and hustled into a van. Later, in Hill Street, a husband punched a MOH woman – she was the only casualty – and was promptly arrested by the police.

As an example to others, several private houses, which appeared to be empty, had their locks picked by police experts and were searched thoroughly, as were all houses entered. By late afternoon the operation was finished. Seven hundred odd women had been interviewed, over a hundred and fifty were taken in for testing.

Savile Row HQ was besieged by Press

and TV. Near-frantic reporters clamoured for entry to the zone, for news – anything – and were refused, but by midmorning they did get an uncompromising statement from Bart. By the next morning, no one was in any doubt about the Government's determination. Most women, who had been through the ordeal, firmly agreed with the action, and the Press was cautiously approving. Bart had also announced a week of grace for the "tardy." After that, any woman caught without a certificate would be prosecuted, and liable to a month's imprisonment. The rest of the week was a busy time for the test centres.

On Tuesday Bart struck again. Timed for midday, when few men would be at home, part of Teddington was the target. With the river as a good barrier on one side, patrolled by police launches, the area was easily combed.

Bart hinted that there were further operations pending. He casually said that areas "north of London" were being considered. By the end of the week the percentage had reached ninety-four. The MOH computer estimated that about four hundred fertile women remained unlocated. Bart switched his tactics. Spot-checks were made in shops, supermarkets and offices. Few uncertified women were found, but it kept a small dribble of "voluntary" women for testing and was economical in personnel – and Bart had other, more important, matters in hand.

The first of the converted holiday camps was now ready. Bart mentioned that he was going to inspect it, and to his surprise Julia said she would like to go too. He warned her that there would be TV coverage, but she still said she would go.

Bart did not comment; after his complete failure to recognise or appreciate her point of view – before Farmer stepped in – he was extremely careful.

They drove down to Clacton on a beautiful golden October morning. They spoke little, inhibited by the presence of the Ministry driver. Bart pretended to be immersed in official papers, in fact he wondered how Julia would react to the camp. It was close to London and an obvious choice for her. He wondered too, how well he would get to know this road, how many times he would drive this way... As they entered Clacton he felt her hand seeking his; he was overwhelmed by a sickening feeling, long forgotten. He had loathed returning to boarding school. He squeezed her hand and released it abruptly, making a mental note that whatever camp she chose, he would see they arrived in the dark...

Considerable alterations had been made. As billiards seemed unlikely to attract pregnant women, these halls had been converted into offices and clinics. Ballrooms had been transformed into maternity and labour wards. A small operating theatre had been erected and a covered way connecting it with the labour ward was in hand. The smell of the sea fought a temporarily losing battle with the new paint. The camp perimeter had been discreetly strengthened – but the barbed wire was not visible from the inside.

They were met by the newly installed MOH Matron and the owner's manager. The Matron, a doctor, and mother of five, oscillated in manner between authoritarian and diffident.

They saw a ward, then were led to a row of

chalets. A specimen chalet was ready for occupation. It was trim, neat — and impersonal.

Bart tried to sound enthusiastic. "It's not bad, is it?" he smiled brightly as he tested a bed with his hand. "Feels jolly comfortable."

Julia also tried a smile. Like his, it was no more than a grimace. For all her preoccupation, the Controller was not without tact.

"Will you excuse us for a few minutes, Minister?" She flashed a hard stare at the manager.

As soon as they were alone Julia sank down on one bed, and Bart sat down on the other. He reached across and took hold

of her hands.

"Darling." He felt self-conscious about the word. "There's so little I can say..." He hesitated, and tried again. "You know, once you've got a few of your own things in here..." He tried the appreciative look again, but it was no good. It might be a splendid place for a holiday, but it was not Stanhope Mews – it was not home – yet that was precisely what it must be...

"Will I have to share?" Julia said, almost timidly.

"Not if I've anything to do with it!" He battled on with synthetic eagerness, "That's your bed – this is mine. We'll have a phone beside your bed, so that I can talk to you." He saw one side of her mouth was beginning to quiver, he pulled her to her feet and held her tightly. There was nothing

to say.

"Testing, testing," the loudspeaker system outside boomed hollowly round the camp. "One, two, three..."

Julia laughed a little unsteadily, "That's just about all I needed!"

Bart released her and turned to the open door. He dare not look at her. Outside, beyond the white painted verandah was a tarmac path, beyond that a well-kept lawn. Bart took a deep breath. "It's certainly a better view than Stanhope Mews – and healthier."

Julia disregarded that one. "John, you say husbands will be allowed to stay, but if AI is to be used, how is that going to work?" Her voice was steady once more, calm and

practical. Bart turned. She had sat down on the bed again, nervously fingering her engagement ring.

Bart was glad to get back to the general from the particular. "That's not difficult. Husbands will be allowed to share at any time, provided they take contraceptive pills. It's the young unmarried Mums that are the real problem."

"You mean these new things?" Julia gave a short, hard laugh, "If ever there was a discovery that was an utter dead loss! How can you be sure they've taken them?"

"Simple. All men take a urine test on entry — the drug shows. If the result is satisfactory they get let in, taking another pill on entry, and every week they stay in the camp, under medical supervision."

"What did you mean about the unmarried ones?"

"We're going to do all we can to make the women happy. We've got to do that..."

"Contented cows give more milk," observed Julia bitterly.

"No! Well, yes. In part that's true, but not the whole story. We'll do all we can to give a full life," he hurried on as he saw the obvious retort taking shape. "Take an extreme case, a girl just fifteen. She may well spend the best part of her life, perhaps thirty-five years in this environment. She may be initially a child, keen on games or something, but pretty soon she'll be as boy-mad as most. We have to cater to both phases. We have to provide some male company some of the time. But it's damned tricky. We're in enough trouble with the

Church as it is..."

Julia, more alert than her husband heard the Controller's voice. "Come on darling, we must get on."

There was a short press and TV interview and they had to reinspect a chalet for the benefit of the cameras. Bart was astonished how well his wife took it all. Naturally, the interviewers were more interested in her than him. She was asked to give her views of the camp and she said that it was a good deal better than she had expected. True, it was not home, and she did not look to the future with pleasure, but she recognised that the relatively few women in her state had a duty to perform. The Prime Minister had said that now it was the turn of some women to fight for the nation, and she was proud to be one of them. Bart tried not to look surprised before

the cameras. She sounded very sincere.

Driving back, he gently felt around this point. "My dear, that was a splendid little speech you made."

"Surprised you?"

"Well, frankly, yes. You were so sincere."

"It rather surprised me too. The silly thing is that part of me is really sincere. Being personally involved has tended to obscure the main issue. You as Minister, not John Bart, husband, know very well this is the only chance of our survival as a nation. Part of me sees that too, although the selfish side is horrified at the prospect, at the separation – yet for all that..."

Bart took her in his arms. The driver was forgotten, a dim figure in the darkness growing around them.

For two months life went on much as usual for most. By Order-in-Council, all pregnant women had to be in a MOH camp for the last two months of pregnancy. Bart had not rushed this matter, it was more important to get the non-pregnant women into production. A week's warning was given, then, area by area, the fertile women were taken under control. There was some trouble; one or two committed suicide rather than go, and some fought like tigers. Once in camp, even the most recalcitrant became docile under the careful use of sedatives. The Press was strictly controlled, no reports of trouble were published. Farmer saw to that.

Lavish diversions were laid on. The current

West End musical hit *Honeybell* was closed down for a fortnight and sent on a tour of one-night stands at the camps – by order. The latest films were shown, dress shows and parades held, and piped TV was fitted in all chalets and wards as fast as the sets could be produced. Each camp had its own closed TV circuit, complete with a small studio. This was not really for entertainment, but to implement the policy of indoctrination. Mothers of the Nation, as they were tentatively named, had to be made aware of their vital importance. Pride must be engendered, and if eagerness was too much to expect, then at least a sense of dedication must be induced.

Some women brought children with them. This had been catered for, and the kindergarten was in itself a valuable diversion. Bart had no intention of allowing children over the infant stage to remain in

the camps, but it was necessary to proceed slowly...

Pressure eased on Bart, and he was able to spend more time at home. With their acceptance of the situation the tension had eased; Bart could even make slightly shy jokes about her "fourteenth century" figure. They went to films and cinemas two or three times a week; there were almost gay excursions at weekends in that long and lovely autumn. They tried not to count the days and to ignore the lengthening shadows. They were very happy.

It was in the week before Christmas that the shadows suddenly grew larger, darker, and more menacing.

Chapter Nine

Bart first heard about it at a Cabinet meeting held to discuss the takeover of children. Farmer put his views on this subject in his usual blunt manner.

"Children are the future. We've done what we can for production, now we must consider those we already have. They'll have to take the full weight of this situation, we've got to see they're fit for the job. They must be conserved and educated – we can't accept a single avoidable accident. Last year over a thousand died on the

roads, and only a few less in other accidents. That has to stop. Education. No wastage of brain can be accepted, all must be educated to the limit of their capabilities. Agreed?"

There was a general nodding of heads, but no one spoke.

"Right," continued the Prime Minister. "How it's done. I've discussed this with Bart as his Ministry will be responsible. We are agreed that the only thing we can do is to "nationalise" all children over two – there aren't many under – and send them to state kindergartens, junior or senior schools, according to age, all as boarders. Permanently."

"It's impossible!" There was anguish in the Minister of Education's voice. "Public reaction will be strong, to say the least, and

we just do not have the schools or accommodation! I may add that I think I might have been consulted..."

The Premier favoured him with a long stare. "You're being consulted now. As for the public, they're going to accept a lot more than this before we're through. Accommodation. We'll boot the Army off Salisbury Plain for a start. Also there are a number of holiday camps still available..." He stopped, frowning. The Home Secretary was holding one finger aloft. "Yes?"

"On this question of public reaction, I think you should know that there has been a significant increase in abductions and assaults recently. This past week the figures have risen sharply. Forty-four cases of baby-stealing and assault by women, all sterile, upon other women who were pregnant or thought to be pregnant."

"Why?"

The Home Secretary shook his head. "Jealousy between the "have-nots" and the "have's" is clearly at the bottom of it. The increase may be due to the unconscious thought that this season, Christmas, is really for children." He shook his head again. "Still, there you are. If it goes on, you'll have some justification in the action you propose."

"D'you think I need justification?"

"No! I didn't mean that, Prime Minister," replied the Home Secretary hastily. "What I meant was that people will be more willing to accept these measures. There is another point." He stopped, hesitant and uneasy.

"Go on."

"Well. These assaults on pregnant women." The Home Secretary looked fixedly at the Premier, trying hard to ignore Bart. "I have to say that I think it would be better and safer if the affected women went into the camps earlier than the last two months. I'd suggest they be sent in for the last four months." He coughed, and looked down at his blotting pad.

Farmer answered before Bart could speak. "That's a case for individual treatment. Some women show more than others. Bart, I suggest you inform all doctors that they can tell their expectant mothers they may go in as soon as they wish. If the situation gets worse, we'll think again." Farmer watched the tense lines round Bart's mouth relax a little. "Agree?"

Bart nodded, and scribbled a note. He dare not trust himself to speak; the Premier was bending over backwards to help him personally, and Bart knew it.

"Baby-stealing is another matter. Keep the assaults out of the press, but give abduction the full treatment."

"It may encourage other deprived women to baby-snatch," put in the Home Secretary.

"Good!" Farmer sounded almost pleased. "Within limits, just what we want. Strengthens our case. Right?"

"Well, yes-"

"Right, then. The women won't harm the kids. Anyway, we'll soon sweep them all

in." The Premier reverted to the question of schools. There was no real disagreement with the proposals, only discussion how it might best be done. It was decided to set up a committee of three – Home Secretary, Minister of Education and Bart – to examine the situation and report in a week. Bart suggested that as Service accommodation was involved, a representative of the Ministry of Defence should take part. Farmer gave Bart an enigmatic smile.

"Tell MOD to give you details of all camps in the UK."

"But supposing we select a camp they have to keep?"

The smile remained. "Never mind. Just list what you want."

The meeting broke up. Subconsciously Bart noted that not all the Cabinet were leaving, and in the entrance hall he recognised the Chief of Air Staff in subdued conversation with DGI. Clearly there was a meeting of the Defence Committee. Bart recalled the PM's smile, then the matter dropped from his mind. He tried to concentrate on the child nationalisation question, but all too easily his mind slipped to thoughts of Julia, and what the Home Secretary had said.

Bart's plainclothes detective saw him through the inevitable crowd in Downing Street. Without really thinking, Bart crossed the Horse Guards Parade and turned into St. James Park. Striding along, breathing deeply the cold, sharp air, he tried to think about the children, but Julia kept intruding. He stopped abruptly beside the lake, staring at the muddy water. Some

waterfowl paddled hopefully up. If he, the Minister, could have an escort, could not he, with his own private army, provide an escort for his wife? He resolved to have Julia covered by a plainclothes MOH guard. The decision gave him gratification, if not pleasure, at his power. Less preoccupied, he would have been shocked at this reaction. Plain Dr. Bart of Wimpole Street had little taste for the more obvious forms, or trappings, of power.

He resumed his walk and turned out of the park into Birdcage Walk. Now he was able to concentrate on the children, he looked with a sharper eye at Wellington Barracks. Then he remembered the newer Chelsea Barracks; that really was an idea. With a footbridge over the Chelsea Bridge Road it could be linked with the grounds of the Royal Hospital. He must find out how many Chelsea Pensioners there were... Bart

quicken his pace.

Three days later the National Schools Committee had completed a preliminary survey. The difficulties were endless, but Bart's emergency powers made a great difference. He had taken the Premier at his word, and the list of suitable properties included Chelsea Barracks, the RN College, Greenwich, all the remaining holiday camps, and a number of hotels that had the benefit of rural surroundings. A vital factor in selection had been to find sites where the risk of road accidents was minimal.

All schoolteachers were warned they would be required to take up resident posts. This caused some complaints, but Bart stamped on that from the very beginning. An Appointments Bureau would do the best it could, but once a teacher had been

allocated, that would be it.

The Premier's reception of the list could only be called impassive. He studied it, pulled thoughtfully at his nose, grunted, and scribbled "Approved" and signed it.

"Go ahead as soon as you like."

Bart, keyed up and expecting some opposition, felt vaguely thwarted. "Very well. I'll see Defence tonight."

Farmer nodded. It was evident he was not deeply interested. Many features of his administration were without parallel; one was the speed of action. Where previous governments had spent weeks on a matter, Farmer's acted in hours. There was astonishingly little paper work. An idea was produced, discussed and if approved by

the PM, put into effect at fantastic speed. There was, of course, some argument and dissension; three Ministers had resigned in the first month, and several senior civil servants had collapsed under the strain. But all concerned with the ship of state were imbued with a deep sense of urgency – and Farmer was very much the captain.

Bart was puzzled at the Premier's attitude. He said so.

Farmer grinned. "Not sure I should tell you, mightn't be good for your peace of mind. Simple really. I've been under a lot of pressure from the US and NATO to tell all. Yesterday I did. Made a free gift of the PROLOX formula to all NATO members."

That shook Bart. "Good God! You didn't!"

Farmer's grin broadened. "The US are bloody livid we didn't pass it to them alone – and they daren't say so!"

"But why?" Bart frowned. "What is the point?"

"Simple. We've no friends now. D'you imagine NATO would sit back and let this desirable residence be occupied by a mere five or six – or even twenty – million? Not on your life! I told 'em straight: we're getting out of NATO – and all overseas commitments. We're on our own, must become self-supporting..."

"But how do we defend?"

"As I told you earlier, we're being discreetly cordoned off. Large armed forces are a luxury we can't afford – no money, no spare manpower. We'll still be

under the US nuclear umbrella, active partner or not. They've no option. Smaller threats – much more likely – takeover by France, for instance, we can handle."

"How?" Bart was fascinated, horrified by these other aspects of government.

"We're producing PROLOX as a very fine powder. Porton's sure it's effective even if inhaled, never mind the water vector. We're also making a new version of the old flying bomb. Simple backyard job. Carries two hundred pounds of PROLOX, range two thousand miles, speed three hundred and fifty knots." The Premier was not grinning now. "Flies at eighteen-thousand feet, time device blows up plane, disperses powder. Easy."

"And pretty easy to shoot down," observed Bart.

Farmer looked at him sadly. "Thought of that. Any explosion near the plane will create a shock wave, and set off the bursting charge. So that if the plane does not reach its target area someone else gets the benefit! No, people will be only too anxious that the damned thing keeps going. I've told NATO all this, and am letting the rest of the world know through diplomatic channels."

"You think this will be an effective deterrent?"

Farmer shrugged. "Nothing's certain, but it is as good as we can get. We're also producing Black Knight rockets with a hundredpound warhead for longer ranges. That'll take time, but if you're thinking these are fiddling little things, you should know Porton has calculated that it only needed

twenty pounds of tablets to fix us. Dispersion will get at the livestock, too."

"Livestock?"

"Um. The Min of Ag is sure the chicken failure was due to PROLOX. Cattle position's not so clear. For a start, most cows and bullocks drink from natural sources, and it looks as if they wouldn't be affected anyway. Something to do with their double bloody stomachs, I suppose. No doubts, though, about pigs, PROLOX dispersed on grazing'll fix 'em."

"So famine is part of the deterrent?"

Farmer glared. "No! Anyway, it's a temporary state of affairs. Animals have a much shorter reproductive cycle than us — except elephants, and we don't eat many of those! Mind you, Agriculture's flat out,

isolating immune strains, just in case those bastards launch a second strike. Not that that's likely – overflying problems."

Bart did not answer at once. The ecological damage might be immense, perhaps unknowable in human terms, but he did not think Farmer would be very interested. For a short while he tried to grapple with the implications for bees, pollination... He gave it up. "So our defence is instant retaliation against anyone who tries to take us over?"

"Not quite. I told you it was a backyard job. No guidance systems or fancy stuff. The bomb goes in the direction it is pointed. If anyone attacks us, we'll fire in all bloody directions. One thing to be said for our position; we've damned little to lose."

"Don't you think the rest of the world may regard us as a plague spot, and act

accordingly?" said Bart.

"Maybe." The Premier did not seem unduly worried. "Reason why I handed the formula out. Vaporising us will solve nothing. A lot more people have this toy now. Sooner or later some of them will play with it, too." Farmer blew noisily through his pipe. "I hope."

Bart was silent. Farmer, digging inside his pipe, waited, then went on.

"I know what you're thinking, John. Perhaps you're right; I've no scruples, no morals. It's a dirty game, and I don't like it any more than you do – but that won't stop me pulling every trick I know to buy the time you need." He pointed accusingly at Bart. "We may not like what we have to do. That's just hard luck. Still has to be done. I'm a good twenty years older than you.

Won't see the end of it all. You may – from this seat."

"Me?" Again Bart was startled.

"Why not?" Farmer stared hard. "In time someone will. You've got the ability, and this sad business of your wife will give you the stiffening – and standing – you need. Don't worry, I've no intention of giving up yet. Time for you to lose your bloody innocence, and get experience. Bear it in mind; try not to be so damned parochial in your outlook."

Bart stared back. This was a new facet of the Prime Minister. He was not all hard, confident drive. The idea that Farmer had to force himself was a new one to Bart. As for the suggestion that he might be Premier one day... Bart reverted to PROLOX.

"Supposing someone does start using this formula?"

"Pure gain to us. I'm thinking of giving the stuff to the USSR as well – just supposing they don't know already. Told the US Ambassador. At first he nearly had kittens, but in the end he saw my point that if they know officially, they would be unable to plead complete innocence." Farmer looked up at the ceiling, "And if anything did happen in China..."

A sad, brooding Christmas had gone, and 1973 was ushered in by exceptionally cold weather. Bart was glad the extra heating installed in the camps proved adequate. In the main, the Mothers Homes, as they were now known, were running well, but the National Schools were proving more difficult. Parents were, understandably, reluctant to let their children go, and in

these early days Bart was anxious to get voluntary acceptance as far as possible. No schools were yet open, but intensive propaganda was directed at parents — including the very secret use of subliminal TV techniques playing on their natural desires for a better life for their children. Your children will have the best of everything. Your children are special...

Bart's idea, the Chelsea Barracks scheme, was a shop window prototype. The Guards had been sharply relegated to Caterham, and the conversion put in hand. The Pensioners were more gently eased out of the Royal Hospital and Wren's masterpiece replanned as a school. The scheme was given full TV and press cover, and interested parents were invited to view. Even so, it was not all plain sailing.

Bart had a personal problem too. Julia did

not take kindly to the MOH escort, especially as her husband was less than honest about the reason. The attacks on pregnant women still went on, and while the number of assaults did not rise appreciably, Bart was keenly aware that the percentage of women assaulted did; there were fewer targets as women entered the camps. He told Julia the escort was necessary for her as a Minister's wife. If Julia guessed the real reason, she did not say so. Otherwise their life was, as far as circumstances permitted, near idyllic. Deeply conscious of the passing days, it sharpened their appetite for all that life could offer.

Both begrudged the loss of a single hour; both avidly stored memories, experiences of their life together. This was the summer of their life, and all too soon it would be winter.

Julia had grown more philosophic – at least outwardly – about her future. She spoke of it without evident strain. She had elected to go to Clacton, and Bart secretly arranged for two chalets to be connected, one furnished as a sitting room. This was, he knew, bad for camp discipline – they preferred to call it "Home harmony" – but he told the Matron, that as Minister, he had to work on weekends, and that the extra room was more for him than his wife...

January passed, and the biting cold continued into February. One morning, as Bart left for his office, Julia said she was going to do a little shopping and have her hair done. He had been married long enough to know he could not hope to get that sacred rite postponed, but he warned her to be especially careful on the icy pavements. The duty MOH woman, a

mother before the advent of PROLOX, assured him she would see Mrs. Bart was careful. Even patted his arm as she helped him into his overcoat. He was not to worry, etc.

Two hours later a shocked secretary told him that Julia had been attacked outside Harrods and was in St. George's Hospital. Within five minutes he was in his car. As he was driven with total disregard of the speed limit through the park, Bart called on the car phone. Julia did not appear to be seriously injured, but a complete examination was in progress. Some of the numbing anxiety lifted, to be replaced by anger. He leapt from the car before it had fully stopped, bounded up the steps to be met by the Matron. It appeared that the MOH guard had slipped on the pavement and broken her leg. Immediately a crowd gathered, and a woman had resented

Julia's manner in ordering her to keep clear, an order delivered with all the authority, Bart guessed, of a junior nurse. Her manner, plus her obvious condition, had been too much for the woman. She had gone for Julia's face and belly. It was a sudden ferocious attack which took the bystanders by surprise, and the two women were on the ground scratching and kicking in an instant. The assailant was dragged off, and disappeared in the crowd. Fortunately the ambulance called for the MOH guard was soon on the spot, and both she and Julia were whisked off.

Bart's anger with the MOH guard evaporated, and he forgot her entirely when he caught sight of Julia on the trolley, leaving the X-ray room. She was very pale, and there were two livid scratches down one cheek. She was in shock, explained a slightly overawed young doctor, but

otherwise – apart from extensive bruising – unharmed, subject to the X-rays, of course. Subject also to Dr. Bart's approval, they would like to keep her in for the night. Dr. Bart did approve, although his wife protested. He saw her into bed, given a mild sedative, and then he left. He drove back to the Ministry, his eyes closed, utterly thankful that she was safe.

He tried to work, but the implications of the attack were inescapable. His staff found him particularly difficult to deal with, and their quiet unspoken sympathy did nothing to improve his temper. Somehow the morning passed. He had intended going home to lunch, but now there was no point. The vigilant Miss Parkins decided for him, and a tray was sent up. Watching her set out the meal with her usual precision, Bart realised that soon this would be his daily pattern. Now it might be the pattern a lot

sooner.

The phone rang. It was his brother-in-law, condoling with him.

"How did you know?" said Bart sharply.

"News travels fast in the jungle of West End medicine. How is Julia?"

Bart told him. Flavell expressed his relief and invited Bart to dine with him that evening. Bart was not overkeen, but the empty house in Stanhope Mews was even less attractive.

"You're sure it won't be too much..."

"My dear fellow! Mary will be furious if you don't come!"

Bart went directly to the hospital from his office. Julia, under sedation, was slightly bemused and sleepy. She was comfortable and would be able to leave the next morning. Bart was well satisfied, and arranged to collect her at nine thirty.

It was a bitter night with a cutting north-east wind which made the Flavell drawing room even more attractive. Bart suppressed a pang of jealousy at the evidence of domestic happiness which he must soon lose. There was a good fire, dark wine-red velvet curtains that shut out the night, intimate subdued lighting. Bart looked sourly at his host and hostess and the large white bearskin before the fire... Mary, feet tucked under her, waved him to the sofa beside her. Bart braced himself for her flow of exaggerated chat, but was surprised again to find her warm, friendly and totally devoid of her usual artificialities.

This was, he realised, the first time he had met her outside a "party" atmosphere, and her resemblance to Julia was overwhelming. Julia... Roger, full of graceful charm, was a perfect host. Although Bart had few interests apart from his work and his wife, they managed to give him a very pleasant evening. He left much later than he had intended, and with a revised opinion of both of them.

Chapter Ten

Bart visited and reassured a most abject MOH guard, then took Julia home. As arranged the night before, Mary was waiting for them at Stanhope Mews, and the invaluable Mrs. Humphries, only too anxious to help, had the house in review order. Despite her protests, Bart insisted Julia go to bed, and having assured himself that all was under control, he left.

To his surprise, Mary was still there when he returned in the late afternoon.

"Mary! I thought you'd have gone..."

She held up a warning finger, looked significantly up the staircase, then led the way into the drawing room.

"I must warn you, John, Julia is in a very upset state. Be careful what you say. She's very nervous – says she will never go out without you, and is very near tears. You'd better go up, or she'll wonder what we're talking about."

Mary had not exaggerated. It took all Bart's skill to keep his wife from breaking down. She was terrified, not only at going out, but at the possibility of someone breaking in. Bart soon saw that her terror embraced all sterile women; he suspected that it even included her own sister. He talked quietly, gently, to her and gradually she calmed down. The core of her fear, to which she

reverted again and again, was the woman who attacked her.

"Her eyes, John. If you could have seen her eyes." She held his hand with desperate strength. "The hate in those eyes!"

Bart managed to get away long enough to see Mary leave. She offered to come in the next day, but Bart said, with some hesitancy, that he did not want to bother her, adding with sudden inspiration that he hoped to spend the next day at home. He would give her a ring.

Mary's smile was ironical, tinged with bitterness. "I understand, John. Don't worry. Remember Julia and I are twins."

Looking at her, he was not likely to forget.

He took the bull by the horns. "Can you honestly say her fear – as far as you are concerned – is completely irrational?"

She looked carefully, dispassionately at him, slowly buttoning her coat. "Yes, I think I can." Her words were carefully chosen. "Julia is safe with me. Deep down she knows it – but I've a notion how the woman with the eyes felt." Her mood lightened, she brushed her lips against his cheek. "Poor John! If you think I can help – anyway, keep in touch."

Bart let her out without answering. He was absorbed in what she had said, and the way she said it. For once he knew Mary had made an understatement. Julia called out, bringing him back to his immediate surroundings. He was aware of lingering traces of Mary's perfume. A couple of steps, and he stopped again. If he had

rightly interpreted Mary's mind – and she was Julia's own sister! Julia called again, there was rising fear in her tone.

"Coming, darling, I'm coming!"

For two days Bart stayed at home. He practically lived on the telephone, and there was an endless succession of visitors and messengers with reports, memos and requests. At first Bart had his secretary in, but Julia, now up and about, immediately showed signs of stress. At the end of the second day, the improvement in his wife was fractional, and Bart knew they had to face it. The only woman Julia could stand near her was Mrs. Humphries, a dear old soul of indeterminate age and uncertain false teeth. She had volunteered to live in until "you get settled," an offer they both gratefully accepted. Mrs. Humphries had produced a meal, stayed long enough to

see Julia start eating, then retired to the guest room and a TV set.

They finished the meal, and sat back on the sofa before the fire. Bart gave his wife a glass of brandy and remarked that the meal was not bad.

"Yes. Mrs. H is a real treasure." With her head on his shoulder, her arm linked with his, Julia was relaxed, happy. Bart thought this was the moment.

"She certainly is. It's very good of her — how does her husband get on?"

"Mr. H? She told me there is a good canteen where he works, and that he can have all his meals there." Julia smiled. "Mrs. H says he is an old soldier, and is always telling her he can look after himself.

Now he's got a chance to prove it."

"All the same, it's rather hard on him, isn't it? We can't expect her to stay long, darling. I could arrange for an MOH woman," Bart felt Julia's hand tighten its grip on his, "to live in. You could choose..."

"No, John." Julia's tone was quiet but determined. "I know I'm being a dreadful nuisance – no, let me go on – but what with this unspeakable disaster, and being pregnant, and then that woman..." She broke off; the grip on him was even tighter. Gradually it eased as she went on, "But for all my silliness, you must see I've a deeper, personal involvement in all this than you. In the last few days I've come to realise that there is now a very real and deep division in women of childbearing age. Either you can or you can't. Even those who had children before this happened and are now

sterile are really on the other side. As for the sterile ones, the 'have-nots,' I saw something in those few seconds in that woman's eyes which you, as a man, cannot hope to understand. I know now I've seen the same look – not so intense or so horrible – in other women. Many other women – even Mary..."

"Oh really, my dear! You mustn't..."

Julia shook his arm. "Don't tell me I mustn't imagine things! I know! If only you could understand! It's like the eyes of a cat – any cat, all cats. It doesn't matter if they're tabbies, tigers or lions, there's the same watchful, deadly look. It doesn't mean you fear a house cat, but you know, given the right circumstances, they'd have you. The 'have-nots' are like that to – to us. You've been busy selling the idea that we 'Nationalised Mums' were different. It's

true, really true!"

Bart recalled Mary's face... He remembered: this could be the answer to a question that had puzzled the Ministry – why pregnant women had so readily accepted their entry into the camps. He tried another line.

"I could arrange for a male escort, darling."

"Think, John, think! He couldn't go into cloakrooms – or half a dozen other places. This is not just the silly fears of a pregnant woman, whatever you may think! I don't say that we, the fertile ones, are in danger of attack from all other women, but I do see now that the 'have-nots,' even if nonviolent, resent us, are jealous. Many things which were not clear are now plain as day. A waitress brings you a half-cold cup of

coffee – and slops some in the saucer – you are left just that bit longer under the hair dryer... Minor pinpricks, but now I recognise them."

"But surely," objected Bart, "these are very minor matters, and some of them are just your imagination."

"Perhaps," Julia shook her head, and went on wearily. "It's no good trying to explain to you. This is a female thing. A single look, and we know. It's an expression of the 'have-not's' solidarity. One is surrounded by it – and it is very frightening. Very frightening." Julia picked nervously at the hem of her skirt, and shook her head again. "You'll never understand, John, but you must believe me. What makes it all so much worse is not just fears for one's own safety." She stopped, unwilling to go on.

Her unemotional certainty went a long way to convincing her husband. He took her empty glass, placed it carefully on the table, and spoke without looking at her.

"I accept that for you this is very real, and you may well be right." He paused, not knowing what to say. "What do you want to do?"

"Want to do!" There was sudden anger in her voice. "D'you imagine I've any choice? I know, have known since that woman, that I belong to a new breed..." she laughed harshly, "yes, that's good – a new breed!"

Bart turned, gripped her wrists. "No!"

She relaxed under his hard stare, smiled

faintly, and again shook her head. "If only you could understand. I've as much right here as – as a mermaid ashore." Her voice broke, she buried her head in his arms. "I must go, John! This is not my world any more... not any more."

Bart held her head close to him, and stared into the fire.

Two days later Bart took his wife down to Clacton. Julia had expressed no desire to see any friends – even Mary – and John was not going to make any suggestions.

He tried, with the connivance of Mrs. Humphries, to have a small, special dinner, but champagne or not, it was no great success. Julia was quiet, subdued, in full control of herself – too controlled, Bart felt. Her real feelings were revealed when he

saw her unobtrusively run a caressing hand over the back of their large sofa. He knew well her thoughts...

There was a quick farewell, stabilised by last-minute domestic orders, to a tearful Mrs. H, and then they left.

The weather had changed. A strong south-wester, wet and warm, had melted the last vestiges of the ice and snow. But Julia shivered slightly as she got in the car without a backward glance. Unknown to her, Bart had an MOH van waiting in the mews shadows to collect a few of their favourite pieces – a picture or two, a Persian rug, a small dressing table – his wedding present – books. To give time for the van to get to Clacton before them, Bart had ordered his chauffeur to take his time. They took a devious route through the West End; Knightsbridge, Hyde Park

Corner, Piccadilly... Julia, close beside him, watched the lurid neon-lit scene in silence. In Leicester Square, with crowds pressing round the car, she pulled her coat round her, moved closer to him. He took her hand to reassure her, and found she was trembling. It was only when the car reached the relative darkness of Whitehall that she relaxed and spoke.

"They're all dead, John. All useless, dead. The women know it. That is why they hate us so much..."

Doctor Dicks, the Matron, met them. Outwardly hearty, full of the "all girls together" attitude, she was inwardly sensitive, shy. But standing in the brilliant light of the main gate, dressed in the severe MOH uniform, her crisp iron-grey bobbed hair firmly clamped under her porkpie hat, no one, least of all Julia, would

have guessed her inner nature.

A brief handshake and smile, and the Matron tactfully concentrated on Bart. "Everything's ready, Minister." She stressed the first word.

Bart nodded his thanks; he had no desire to talk. They walked in silence, the Matron leading. Their luggage had been taken before the car had scarcely stopped. Bart walked arm in arm with his wife. Camp Rule One, he thought..."No motor transport beyond the Reception Area." They met no one in their short walk, and Bart wondered if the Matron had stage-managed that as well. In the chalet area many windows were lit; faint music overlaid the sound of the sea.

The Matron stopped before the last but one

chalet in a row. She turned and handed Bart a key.

"I hope you will be comfortable," she said simply. "If you want anything, phone me. Good night, Minister. Good night, Mrs. Bart." She nodded sharply, and set off at a brisk pace.

Bart regarded her broad back in the dim light. "You have to give her full marks for tact, darling. Come on, let's see." He took her arm.

True, it was not Stanhope Mews, but Julia gave a small gasp which delighted Bart.

"Darling!" She hugged his arm. "Darling John!" Then she was crying. Bart shut the door behind them.

"Here! What is all this?" He took her in his arms. "This is a fine way to thank me."

Julia took his handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, sniffed and looked around her. The small room, close-carpeted in pale grey, contained a writing desk, two armchairs, fitted bookshelves. In one corner was a drinks cupboard which also served as a TV table. On the shelves were many of their books, in the centre of the floor, its glowing colours well set off by the carpet, was the Persian rug.

Bart dumped his dispatch bag on the desk with a proprietorial thump. He smiled. "Your two favourite pictures are around somewhere – there they are! I'll leave it to you to choose the best place for them. If there's any book I've missed, I'll bring it down." He tapped the telephone on the desk. "There's an extension in the

bedroom."

Julia was genuinely excited. "The bedroom! John, how did you arrange all this?" She picked up and looked with fresh eyes at a Meissen shepherdess which three hours earlier had stood on the mantelpiece in that other home. Bart assumed a solemn air.

"You must remember, Mrs. Bart, your husband is the Minister. He must have somewhere to work."

They laughed together like children. He took her hand and led her through the short connecting passage to the next chalet, pointing out the door to the bathroom on the way.

Again Julia gasped with pleasure at the

sight of her own dressing table and other familiar things.

"The flowers! How thoughtful you are, darling!"

"Well, no," admitted Bart, awkwardly. "That is a little something from the management."

"Oh." The excitement died in Julia's face, then she rallied, tried to smile. "It's a nice thought."

He led her back to the sitting room. "Try to be fair, darling. The staff do their best in a very difficult job. Believe me, they want you – all of you – to be happy. There'll be mistakes, bound to be, this is a completely new situation for everyone. Things will get better – in time we hope the Mums will help to run the camp..."

But Julia's mood changed. "Look, John, d'you mind if we leave all that for now? I've plenty of time," she laughed unsteadily. "Let's have a drink, and get to bed."

"Of course, darling," said Bart, submissively. "Sorry."

"Don't be too abject, John. It doesn't really suit you – and I don't know that I can stand it."

Bart had to leave at eight o'clock. At seven thirty when he had bathed and shaved and was dressing, Julia discovered that breakfast was served in the dining hall. She replaced the phone with a bang.

"We'll see about that! John, don't forget to bring down a kettle and a toaster. I know

I can't possibly face a dining hall in the morning, and I'm sure you can't."

Bart was glad to see her in an organising mood, although he suspected it would speedily vanish when he left. He played up, suggested she should make out a list for him, and hurried on with his dressing. At seven forty-five the immediate crisis was solved when the Matron herself arrived with a flask of coffee.

"Thought you might like this, Mrs. Bart. Also I thought it might be a jolly good plan if we had a chat – nine thirty suit you?"

"Yes, Matron." Three years nursing training had left its mark.

"Fine – fine!" said Matron, adding cheerily as she caught sight of Bart, "Morning, Minister! Brought you some

coffee. Must be off." She strode purposefully away.

Bart gave his wife a conspiratorial look. They both smiled.

"She's plain Jane and no nonsense all right, but she could be a lot worse. I hope you're going to like her."

Julia grimaced as she poured coffee. "That's a bit much to ask, but I feel I can rely on her – she is one of us." She handed him a cup. "That is a great deal. I wouldn't choose this life, but in the world as it now is, this is the only place for me and my kind." She took a deep breath. "Drink your coffee, darling, and just go. I live only to see you..." Her voice faltered, and she looked away. "Ring me when you get to the office – please."

The day passed surprisingly well for Bart. There was, as usual, plenty to do, and he rang Julia twice. She too seemed reasonably happy, the "little chat" with Matron had not produced any unpleasant surprises, and later she had done the "joining routine." With an easier mind, Bart got on with his work. He stayed late, finally leaving for home at eight thirty.

As he closed his front door behind him the full sense of loneliness and desolation hit him. The single place laid by Mrs. Humphries for his supper made it a lot worse. He walked swiftly through the dining room to the drawing room, switching on lights. He looked at the bare wall, unfamiliar without the pictures. He turned on the radio and poured himself a drink.

"... and here again are the headlines. The Prime Minister announced today a three-

year programme to increase meat production by one hundred fifty percent. All armed forces are to be withdrawn from Gibraltar and Malta by the end of the year. Mrs. Bart, wife of the Minister of Health, joined her Mothers Home today. The first National Youth College will open..."

Bart turned the set off so violently that the knob came away. He tossed it carelessly aside and gulped down the rest of his drink. Someone must have done some careful staff work in his Ministry or he would be inundated with Press and TV by this time. He went to the window and parted the curtains. Across the narrow road was a man in a raincoat. Bart walked through the house and looked out of a back window overlooking the cobbled mews and garage area. There was another raincoated figure. The universal uniform... Bart went

back to the drawing room; only then did he see the envelope on the mantelpiece.

My darling,

There is so much I want to say, and I do not know how to say it. I love you now and always.

Separation and time cannot alter my feelings, so do not feel too lonely. Already we have had more than many people have in all their lives – and this is not the end.

Your Julia

Bart read the note twice, then carefully folded it and put it in his wallet. He crossed to the phone.

Chapter Eleven

April was a busy month. The Government drive for self-sufficiency gathered momentum. To save foreign currency, all holidays abroad were banned. France, Italy and Spain all protested strongly, but were powerless to retaliate as the British tourist trade had virtually ceased to exist. The Spanish Government hinted that they might have to reconsider their attitude to the Gibraltar "problem." Farmer bluntly replied in very plain English that, as far as he was concerned, they could have the place. Any native Gibraltarians who wished to settle in Britain would be welcome —

particularly pregnant women.

Farmer announced all edicts on TV. He had instituted a weekly talk to the nation, and his blunt forthright manner, combined with a complete absence of pomposity, enabled him to put over the most Draconic measures with astonishing success. His TAM rating mounted steadily, viewers began to write to him, and Farmer was quick to see that this offered a good chance to establish a more personal relationship with the public. He began to answer selected questions, naming the originator. Many of his Ministers were afraid this might degenerate into an act, but Farmer never overdid it. A few MP's objected, saying that their position was being usurped, but as Farmer dealt only with general questions, and seldom descended to the particular, the grumblers did not get very far.

Not that it was an entirely solo performance. Other Ministers were sometimes featured when Farmer wanted to deal with a particular aspect of his policy in detail. Bart appeared twice in April in connection with the National Schools. The Chelsea Youth College, with twelve-hundred places, would open in May. Bart announced that further expansion was planned and that a kindergarten for the very young – over three – would be set up in Battersea Park. Farmer rounded off that subject.

"John Bart has given you the outline. This is a prototype for all the schools now being prepared. We hope to learn from this scheme, but if you're worried that your kids are going to be the guinea pigs, you may as well know now that a certain young Prince is going there and so is my

youngest. This is no stunt; both boys are going there, and staying there until they are eighteen. I don't suppose Buckingham Palace are any more pleased than I am at the prospect, but as always, our Royal Family are prepared to give a lead. And if the school is good enough for them, it's certainly good enough for me – and it's just got to be good enough for you, too."

But despite everything, Bart managed to weekend at Clacton. The first one established the pattern. He arrived on Friday evening, took the sterility test and walked to "his" chalet.

It was a fine evening, and many of the "Mums" were out enjoying the air. Bart walked quickly, self-conscious in his town suit and well aware that many recognised him. Not for the first time, he thought about the class problem, now sharpened for him

by personal contact. Class distinction might be very tiresome and silly, but just because one did not like it, it did not automatically cease to exist. It had been obvious from the beginning that the only common factor to his women – for Bart had already begun to think of them as "his" – was their fertility.

One measure to reduce friction had been the introduction of a standard dress. A smocklike creation in nylon, produced by a leading dress designer, it could be adapted to the change in the pregnant female form. To avoid the institutional air a uniform would give, there was variation in sleeve length, neckline and colour. This dress had to be worn throughout the day, but women might wear other clothes in the evenings or at any time in their own chalets. In the Clacton home, the Matron had also ordered the staff to wear it. Everyone wore a name badge on the left breast, now

customary in most large organisations. Black letters on white plastic for Mums, white on black for staff.

Bart nodded shyly to everyone he passed, a nervous smile clamped on his face. He was firmly convinced it must look like an inane grin, but he could do nothing about it. Beneath the grin was an intense feeling of responsibility for these women, a desire for their well-being, not just as a means to an end, but for themselves. He tried to gauge their state of mind from expressions, but this was about as informative as faces in a bus queue. A few laughed, a lot chattered, a very few walked alone and silent. He was glad to see that most of the men – a steady trickle of weekenders was evident – also looked self-conscious and curiously furtive in the presence of so much fertility. This was, of course, the overwhelming feature. Well over half the women exhibited some

sign, ranging from the faint bulge to curves of terrifying imminence.

Julia had been watching from the chalet, and at the sight of him almost ran, despite her condition, to meet him.

"Steady!" Bart dropped his bag and held her at arm's length. They smiled at each other, and all the world disappeared... Bart shut his eyes, then looked appraisingly at her. She had chosen navy blue for her dress, her hair was freshly set, and it was clear she had done all that was possible to make an eight months pregnant woman look attractive.

Her gaze dropped under his steady scrutiny. There was a trace of embarrassment.

Bart stopped that. "Ow about a kiss, then?" He spoke in a mock-Cockney voice, hoarse and urgent, the remnant of an old private joke.

Julia looked at him gratefully. "Fool!" She took his arm. "You must wait until we get indoors. Don't forget your bag." On the small verandah she stopped. "Now put your bag down, close your eyes – and don't open them until I say so."

Bart did as he was told. Inside, she pulled his head down to her, and kissed him. "There. That will have to do for now. Open your eyes."

She had rearranged the living room. One match-boarded wall had been covered with a tightly stretched coarse canvas, and painted white. In the middle hung her

favourite picture. The chairs were rearranged, and there was a new table lamp. That was all. Bart looked at his wife's bright, excited face, her eyes watching avidly for pleasure in his expression. His throat hurt, he could have cried. He pulled her to him, but Julia was not going to miss her treat.

"You do like it, darling?" The anxiety in her voice was painful to hear. "I had a dreadful time organising that canvas, you've no idea..."

Bart really thought it was an improvement, and he said so as extravagantly as he could. Julia was like a child at Christmas. She chattered on about her plans. They would have "minute" dinner parties. She had met a little woman... She chattered on as if there was no such thing as PROLOX, or an endless vista of multiple pregnancies.

To him, her enthusiasm was gallant, very pathetic, and deeply moving. From a world of quiet luxury, of cars, travel, of all possible entertainment, she was reduced to a twelve by ten wooden-walled room, her travel restricted to walks to the beach, forbidden to enter a motor vehicle of any sort – except an ambulance – for perhaps the next thirty years. Could this pathetic enthusiasm be desperate self-deception? But he could be wrong. Clearly Julia did not regard her efforts as pathetic or particularly brave. Her old world had been shattered. Right; she was not going to sit bewailing her fate. Bart trembled inwardly at his nearness to a false step. He brightened up, and entered into her plans with real enthusiasm. He unpacked his bag, producing an electric kettle and toaster – and a large bottle of perfume.

"John darling! How wildly extravagant!"
She was delighted.

"Thought you might like it. Don't go raving mad with it. I cheated slightly; I happened to know that French perfume, along with all foreign cosmetics, will be on George Farmer's next list of banned imports." He pushed her gently into a chair. "It's homebuilt lily-of-the-valley from now on. Now stop telling me all your plans to reorganise the place, and tell me how you've got on."

She did. She liked her doctor, and the ante-natal clinic nurse was an old fellow-student nurse. Matron was a "poppet" and most of the women she had met were friendly. Everyone knew she was the Minister's wife, and many were not sure how to treat her. Some were inclined to be subservient, a few tended to be faintly

aggressive.

Bart was a little worried, and it showed.

"Don't fret, darling, I'm not made of porcelain – don't forget my three years in a teaching hospital. I've seen it all before – and worse. Now; tell me all about yourself. Has Mrs. H been looking after you?"

She interrogated him minutely on the state of his laundry, his food and how he was sleeping. It was evident that there had been a good deal of telephonic contact with Mrs. H. Bart realised anew that one way and another, Julia had managed to be pretty busy since her arrival. Still in a practical mood, she asked her husband when he would like to eat, adding that she was so excited to have him home – the word slipped out unconsciously – she didn't feel like eating a thing.

"Quite frankly, I'm not very hungry either, but I must put in an appearance."

Julia saw this, and anyway she was longing to show him off — not as the Minister, but as her husband — and suggested seven forty-five would be a good time. The nightly bingo session would start then, and as all the addicts ate early, the dining hall would be relatively empty. Bart changed into a long-sleeved pullover, dark grey trousers and an open-necked shirt. All Marks & Spencer's and therefore beyond criticism.

As Julia had predicted, the dining hall was not overcrowded. They lined up at the cafeteria, Bart stifling memories of legs of cold chicken eaten on a sofa... The clatter of cutlery mixed with the dehydrated tape music. Julia seemed impervious to it all; he

marvelled at her easy acceptance of the life, not knowing that she would have been equally pleased to eat at a soup kitchen – with him.

All food was free, but drinks could be bought at a separate counter. Bart got a half bottle of Hock, and was relieved to find he was not required to drink it out of plastic beakers.

"This is another thing we have to make the most of, my dear."

Julia nodded and smiled. As if she cared.

That night she broached the subject of their child. Bart had switched the light off, and was lying back relaxing, happy that his wife should have grappled so well with her problems.

"John darling, take my hand."

He reached out in the darkness across the narrow space between their beds.

"Our child is due in a fortnight, and we've never really discussed it. I know this has been my fault, and you've been absolutely marvellous... In normal times I suppose I'd feel a bit guilty at showing so little interest." She paused, then went on reflectively, "These are normal times now..." she dismissed that train of thought with an impatient shake of her hand. "Anyway, I want you to know that I'm only looking forward because the child is yours. Before all this, I'd thought that someday we'd have children – Oh, damn! I knew I'd make a muck of this!" She snatched her hand away. "I must sound so heartless, but I'm not, really. I'm not even quite sure what I

want to say. I will love the child because it is yours. But I'm not an absolute fool, darling. I've seen some of the women cooing over their babies in the creche, and I know your Ministry – the nation – cannot afford to let them go on playing mother in the old way. I realised this months ago. What is the upper age limit of children allowed in these camps – homes – now?"

"Six." Bart could guess what was coming.

"There you are. It stands to reason that you've got to reduce that – and soon."

Her husband stared into the darkness. "These are early days, we have to move carefully. You're quite right, my dear. Soon, very soon, we will have to take the older ones away. At first there will be kindergartens for the three-to-six group,

later, perhaps creches for the one-to-three group." He stopped. Not even Julia must know the full story.

"Not that I give a damn about all that," said Julia. "All I'm interested in is your wishes for your child. It is one thing to accept your wife must be dedicated to the nation, but your only child..."

"No." His voice was firm, decisive. "We are far more fortunate than most to have a child at all. All we can give him – or her – is our name. Any sort of family life or ties have gone for our generation – and perhaps the next two generations as well. All I would ask is that you try not to get too – er," he fumbled for the word, "attached – for my sake, as well as yours."

"Darling John!" Their hands reached out, touched. "Motherhood is a duty I owe to the

nation, but first, last, always – I am yours."

It was inevitable that one day should be much like another, but every effort was made to make the weekends different. The normal working routine of the home was suspended on Friday evening until Monday morning, there was an expectant air as the Mums waited for the influx of husbands and boyfriends. There were not as many of the latter as the authorities would have liked.

A young man had to be very keen. There were plenty of girls outside who, free from the fear of pregnancy, were prepared to make the most of their condition. Still, there were some boys, faithful swains who stuck to their pre-PROLEX girls. Some even married in the camp.

Bart witnessed one of these ceremonies on

his first Saturday. The Matron asked him to attend; it would be, she said, Good for Morale. Anything that offered hope, however faint, for the future of the girls had to be encouraged. Bart went alone.

The bride was a simpering girl of sixteen, her young body thick with a five-month pregnancy, the handiwork – if that was the word – of her young groom. He was smartly dressed in the height of big city fashion. Black leather coat and trousers and a flaming orange cravat. His pink face, tow hair plastered down, and large red hands belied his sartorial sophistication, and Bart was not surprised to learn that they were a couple from rural Norfolk.

The bride, defiantly dressed in white, was simpering, not because of her condition – in rural communities by no means uncommon – but because Bart was there.

Secretly she thought him smashing – and he was a real live TV personality. Everyone knew his face, and there he was, at her wedding! Big pot in the Government as well, they said...

Bart listened with near-cynical amusement at the priest's fractional hesitation over the "gift of children" passage in the service. He made a mental note to find out how the Church had progressed on a revised service. The Bishops were hardly geared to the pace of Farmer's Cabinet, but the old service, used "outside," could hardly fail to arouse, at best, derision. At worst, it might damage morale. And that was very much the Government's business.

Afterwards there were the inevitable photographs. The bride got Bart to pose with her and the groom, permanent proof of her moment of contact with the fab world of

TV. Then the reception. Bart joined in as well as he could, but was held back by his natural reticence and a curious mixture of humility and contempt. Yet contempt was too strong a word; annoyance, he decided, was nearer. Humble, in that these people were behaving so normally, accepting with an inner dignity, a fantastic situation. Annoyance that they should all be such damned fools as to accept... What else? countered Bart's other self. He gave it up.

There were endless toasts; Bart said a few words. What they were he had no remembrance, but they went down well. He kissed the bride, and in a moment of sudden abandon, kissed her mother as well. There were shrieks of laughter. Brown ale in hand, Bart eased to the edge of the crush.

Watching the flushed faces, hearing the

earthy jokes that went far beyond mere suggestiveness, he suddenly saw, quite sharply... The bride, now full of life and vitality, the down of youth fair upon her, in ten years' time... coarsened, fat, sweating and heaving in her eighth or ninth confinement. He saw the expression in her eyes as a voice said, "Come on, dear, there's just one more..." He felt sick. Julia...

"Wassamarrer, ole man?" the bride's father breathed gustily in his ear. "Look as if you've seen a ghos', ole man – a bloody ghos'!"

Julia's baby was due in the latter part of May, and her husband tried to keep within striking distance of Clacton. This was not always possible. The Chelsea scheme was working; the response for older children had been very good, but the under-ten group was much less easy to bring in. It

had been anticipated that a few parents might try to get out of the country with their families, and a close watch was kept.

One unlucky couple with three children managed to get to sea in their small yacht, but were beaten back by a sudden gale. The father pretended it was just a cruise, but the way the boat was stored made that look highly improbable. The police discovered that they had recently sold their house, and that clinched matters. Farmer, deeply angry, ordered prosecution under the Traitorous Activities Act. The parents got two years each in the newly-formed penal camps – Farmer had put a stop to wasted manpower in prisons – and the children, made wards of the state, were sent to the second school to open, Longleat.

Farmer dwelt at length on this case in his

next TV address.

"I'm asking Parliament to amend this Act; the penalties aren't stiff enough. And anyone with the same ideas may as well know right now; they won't be welcome abroad. We're the outcasts of the world! They all fear the taint of sterility. Even our embassies are shunned — recently in Moscow our ambassador gave a party to launch an export drive. Two hundred were invited. That means about a hundred women. Three women turned up. Three!" There was much more in this vein.

Bart was touring the country inspecting progress in the new schools and exhorting parents to let their children go. The Minister of Education took some of the load, but no one commanded as much attention — except the Premier — as Bart. The Cabinet were agreed that compulsion must not be

used until a good proportion of the children were already taken over voluntarily. It was not a repetition of the fertile-woman operation. There, the vast majority of women were sterile, knew it, and had little sympathy with those affected. Men, less emotionally involved – apart from those with fertile wives – generally saw the need, and if married to a sterile woman, it would have been matrimonial suicide to side with "the others." Children were different.

As luck would have it, Bart was in Manchester when his child arrived. Matron herself rang him. A girl, she said, a fine child – seven pounds and two ounces, she added with unprofessional pleasure. Bart went on with his tour. If his aide guessed, when the Minister ordered him to wire flowers to Mrs. Bart, he did not say so. Bart was not volunteering information, and the aide was well aware of his increasingly

spikey frame of mind.

Two days later Bart saw his wife in the Home maternity ward. He entered unannounced, and the fact that some of the occupants of the ten-bed ward were in various states of undress hardly registered in his doctor's mind. What he did notice was that Julia was exchanging female witticisms with another young woman, also bedridden, at the other end of the ward. She was overjoyed at his sudden arrival, but he had the feeling that in some way he had intruded on another, private world. Not that the existence of the small intense world of a ward was a new phenomenon to him; what surprised him was to find Julia caught up in it. He was indeed surprised — and glad.

Their meeting was a little constrained. Both were aware of the effect of his entrance on

the rest of the ward. One or two women got quickly back into bed, the staff nurse tried unobtrusively to tidy the ward, horrified as only a staff nurse can be at the unexpected arrival of the Big Man.

"Hello," said Bart stiffly, conscious of the silence.

"Hello to you, too," answered his wife, more easily. She patted the bed. "Sit down."

Bart sat down. The staff nurse crackled starchily past to a group of women, there was a hum of subdued conversation that grew. Someone giggled and Bart relaxed. He took his wife's hand.

"How are you, darling?"

"Wonderful. Couldn't be better. It was all frightfully easy, no trouble at all. My doctor says I can go back to the chalet in a couple of days." There was no doubt she was in good spirits.

"What is it like in here, from the customer's angle?"

"Absolutely super! Out of this world! All of us – not just me – are treated like royalty. 'Staff' is a dear; can be strict, of course. Thing I can't get over is the vast number of people we have to look after us."

This was no great surprise to her husband. All maternity services had naturally shut down "outside," and with the appalling drop in the birthrate, there were, for the first time in medical history, more than enough staff. Bart knew that the Clacton Home, for example, had the cream of the maternity

services of Guy's, Bart's and St. Thomas'. In addition, Mums who were under four months pregnant were invited to volunteer as ward-maids.

"Good. I'm so glad." It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if she was happy, but he thought better of it.

"Darling, have you seen your daughter yet?"

"Good Lord, no! D'you imagine I'd see her before you?"

Julia sighed with satisfaction. "Darling, it's simply wonderful to see you. It seems so long." Some of the excitement faded from her face. "I'm sorry it was not a boy, John."

He had expected that one. "If this was back

in the old days you might have had reason – although I doubt it. Now... it must be self-evident to you that this is a matter of no importance. Really."

Later, looking at his daughter, Bart did experience a pang of regret; a little for his loss, a good deal more for the future a daughter must have.

And no one knew that future better than Bart.

Chapter Twelve

August 1973. John Bart yawned and stretched in the sun and contemplated his pallid legs. Julia, lying beside him, made him look even paler. In spite of her new job she had much more opportunity to sunbathe. She had rapidly recovered from the birth of her child, and although it was true that she only really came alive when her husband was with her, somehow the long lonely hours had to be filled, and nursing was the obvious choice.

June and July had been, for the Barts, their

long-delayed honeymoon. Pressure of work had eased slightly — it was not regarded as politic to try to induce parents to part with their children in what was, by tradition, the height of the summer holidays — so Bart had a few days off, and this was it. He peered through halfshut eyes at the glittering sea, and yawned again.

"Bored?" Julia spoke without opening her eyes.

"Me? Good Lord, no!" Bart was startled and even a little indignant. "No, it's this unaccustomed sunshine — plus the inordinate demands made upon me by my wife."

A finger jabbed him in the ribs. "Careful there, Bart. Remember where you are — and who you are."

He grabbed his wife's wrist, he scooped up a handful of sand. "Cheek! It's high time you showed a bit more respect, my girl!"

Julia spotted the sand, her free hand caught his arm. "No, John! My hair — anyway, remember my condition!"

He was unlikely to forget it. At the end of July she had been passed fit and ready for insemination. Bart had been inclined to exercise his power to have the event postponed, although he was well aware that there was no excuse on medical grounds. Julia made the decision. She said simply, "That's what I'm here for, John. You know I'm fit; I know I'm fit — so let's get on with it." And that was that.

Her attitude amazed Bart. To him, she was just the same; warm, loving... but in other

respects, she was a different woman. In the first month at Clacton she had shown a pathetic interest in the world outside, in her friends, events, but as her first pregnancy advanced, the interest lessened, she became more concerned with her immediate life. Never a great letter-writer, she had very soon ceased altogether. Her only constant links with outside were the daily calls to or from her husband and a biweekly chat with Mrs. H about his domestic well-being. For the rest — Bart had become a regular weekly diner at his brother-in-law's. At first he had told Julia, but he detected a certain coolness at the mention of her sister, a coolness that grew. He sounded Mary on her correspondence with her sister, and learned that although Mary wrote fairly often, Julia's letters got fewer, and by the middle of July had ceased. Their telephone conversations were stilted and uneasy, and Julia had not originated a call for months. Thereafter

Bart did not mention his dinners at Harley Street, and Julia did not inquire.

Both parents kept themselves very much in check in relation to their daughter, Diana. After the first ten days she had been transferred to bottle feeding, and neither John nor Julia saw their daughter except in the creche with dozens of other babies. Covertly watching his wife's face as she looked at her daughter, he wondered what thoughts were passing through Julia's mind. He never did know.

And now it was August, and for a change the sun shone. Bart dropped his handful of sand, Julia stretched out once more. He looked at her slim figure, the flat abdomen. Yet at this very moment, he thought, there are possibly three or four human embryos...

"Excuse me, sir."

Bart glanced up. A flushed and panting MOH guard stood over him, sweating.

"Yes?"

"Sir, you're wanted on the telephone. Matron says please take the call in her office."

"Thank you. Tell her I'm coming, will you?" He got to his feet, dusting off sand.

Julia opened her eyes. "Oh no! Can't they leave you alone for a moment?"

"You stay here, darling. I'll be back. I expect it's Miss Parkins can't find something."

"That," said his wife, "will be the day." She saw his expression. "Don't look so worried, John – you don't even know what it is."

Bart did not answer. To take a call in the Matron's office was very inconvenient; it was the other side of the camp, his own chalet was less than a hundred yards away. There was, however, one difference. The phone in Matron's office had a scrambler attachment.

It was not as bad as it might have been, but bad enough. Farmer had had a mild heart attack, and wanted Bart. Half an hour later he was being driven with hair-raising expertise back to London.

The Premier was flat on his back in bed when Bart reached Downing Street. Grailey, the heart specialist, was there, and

Farmer's own doctor. It had not been a serious attack, but rest was essential.

The Prime Minister grunted at the sight of his Minister of Health. "You've been a bloody long time, John." He waved a hand at his wife, "Shove off, Grace. I'll be all right with Bart – he knows a bit of first aid."

Bart surveyed his chief with a professional eye. He had seen the cardiograph readings, heard Grailey's opinion and was not really worried. He said so, adding, "But you've really got to rest..."

"Why d'you think I sent for you? Enough damned quacks without your help. Don't go on about it; I know I've got to slow down – but the work's got to go on. Means more for you. Simple."

Bart looked thoughtfully at the Premier, then walked to the window and gazed out across the Horse Guards Parade. Neither he nor Farmer had reopened the subject of the succession, but naturally Bart had thought about it. Without being consciously aware of it, his views had changed since he had entered politics. He still had no great craving for power. But there was no denying it got things done, and increasingly Bart liked getting things done. But this...

Farmer, lying very still with his eyes closed, broke the silence. "Bit frightened?"

Bart's first impulse was to say no, but he hesitated and was less sure. "Well, you can't deny it's a little daunting." He turned and faced the bed. "And are you sure you want me as a stick rather than the Chancellor, or the Foreign Secretary? They're both experienced men..."

"Don't waste time, especially mine. You know damned well I made my mind up months ago. True, both sound men. Snag is they're both Old Guard. No good for this age — not as leaders. Anyway, I'm not offering you my job. You take over all home affairs, chair Cabinet meetings, do the TV stuff. I will handle defence and watch foreign affairs. You'll have to represent me at functions — dreary bloody dinners." Farmer visibly brightened at the thought.

"Well, if you think I'm up to it..."

Farmer's expression showed what he thought of that. "You'd better get on with it. Draught an announcement. Factual. Another thing; I've been thinking for some time that Minister of Health sounds a bit damn silly for what everyone knows is the number-two man. People connect it with

orange juice and drains. How about Minister of Regeneration? Still keep the other one as well."

Bart saw the point. "How do you think the rest of the Cabinet will take it?"

"Chancellor may not like it. Rest won't be difficult. They're not fools. Six months ago it might have been tricky. Not now. Up to you to be a bit tactful. Helps."

For a fleeting moment Bart tried to recall Farmer being tactful with his colleagues. "I'll try."

"Right." Farmer stared steadily at Bart. "Now me. Tell me quite straight. Am I finished?"

Bart shook his head. "No! Good Lord, no!

There's a lot of mileage left in you yet. Do as you're told, and in three months you'll be back in full charge. As long as you're PM you'll have to have regular checks, and cut out all excessive activities." He added as an afterthought, "And that will probably include your smoking."

Farmer glared. "Damned glad you're not my quack!"

"You needn't expect Grailey will be any better," Bart grinned. "May stop your Scotch as well! And don't get worked up about that, either." He bent down and took the Premier's pulse. "Yes. Time I left you to rest." His tone softened. "Don't be a fool, George. I know if you had your way, you'd be up and doing in a week and damn the consequences. You mustn't. The country can't afford it – and neither can I."

Farmer found his tone embarrassing.
"Tripe."

"You're full of old-world charm," observed Bart. "I'll get down to your office. If you're very good I'll let you see the communique. Might even let you sign a statement regularising my position."

Farmer grinned. "Too bloody late, lad. I signed your appointment before you got here!"

If Bart thought he was busy before Farmer's illness he revised that opinion very quickly. Fortunately he had the ability to pick good assistants, and, equally important, was prepared to let them get on with their particular job. Sleep, he cut to a minimum, and his operation room staff, controlling his growing MOH army, never knew, day or night, when his gangling

figure would appear in their midst. Sometimes he would stride in, talk affably with the Duty Controller, nod and smile at plotters, coders or teletype operators. On other occasions he would stand stock-still in the middle of the large room, hands thrust in pockets, shoulders slightly hunched. In this mood he would read the latest situation reports and leave without speaking.

Not only his staff saw him tense up under the increased burden. The Cabinet soon discovered that he disliked verbosity as much as Farmer. His TV talks were terse and to the point; he never answered viewers' letters. People said he was not as "good" as Farmer, but what he lacked in the human touch was replaced by the added sense of urgency he brought to the screen. Farmer was a father-figure, Bart was not, and he did not try to copy the

Premier's style. However awkward he might appear, few, if any, doubted his sincerity or devotion.

His only relaxation in those days was his daily talk by telephone with Julia. Whatever the situation he found time to call her. Sometimes they would talk for an hour, more often it was for ten or fifteen minutes. If the call was made from his office, and with increasing frequency it was, his staff knew that whatever emergency arose, it would have to wait until he had finished. Apart from these calls, and rare dinners with the Flavells, he gave all his time to his work. Mrs. H hardly saw him. Often she would arrive in the morning to find his supper still untouched. Only the unmade bed and a wet towel on the bathroom floor showed that he had been there at all.

For the first three weeks Bart was unable

to get down to Clacton. Then he did manage one night. It was not a great success; he was too full of tension, and there was no time to unwind – even if state affairs had let him. The evening was punctuated with telephone calls, and although Bart had curtly ordered supper to be served in his chalet, their first private meal together for months was an edgy affair, full of sudden silences and forced smiles. Julia understood his preoccupation, but still felt a twinge of annoyance which she instantly suppressed. It was not his fault, she told herself several times. She banked on breaking through to him once they got to bed. And she might have succeeded had the phone not rung five minutes after he had put the light out.

Bart's quiet controlled anger at the disturbance did little to soothe Julia's feelings. Bart's anger cooled as he

listened. He gently disengaged himself from his wife's arms, switched on the light and sat on the edge of her bed.

There had been what appeared to be a serious riot in North London. This was regarded by the HQ Duty Controller – and Bart – as ominous. The newly formed Woman's Union was involved, not for the first time. This highly militant organisation, with no very clear aims, was attracting a lot of sterile women, serving as a focus for their growing frustrations. Both the MOH and Scotland Yard had been watching the development closely. Now it seemed they had broken up a parents' meeting, arranged by the MOH. Julia hid her head in the pillows as she heard him order his car for seven o'clock. She stifled her bitter urge to tell him not to wait that long. For a while he sat thinking, then he bent over and softly kissed her. She heard him go into

their living room, there was a quiet ping as he lifted the telephone. Deep in conversation with the Home Secretary, Bart did not hear Julia quietly cry herself to sleep. The visit was not a success.

As the holidays drew to a close, the campaign for the children was restarted. Preparation of National Schools had gone ahead unabated, and in areas where some were already operating the old day-schools were closed or heavily reduced in scope and staff – the latter had gone to the new establishments. Parents were thus confronted with the choice of a markedly inferior service or the new, almost glittering – and completely free – centres. Parents might protest, but they had no sympathy from the sterile, and none from parents who had already bowed to the inevitable. The squeeze was on, and all the time the message was hammered home. "Your

children are special. Only the best is good enough."

One of the faster growing sections of MOH was the Publicity Department. In the early days it had been a Cabinet decision that the situation justified "full use of all mass media communication." Thereafter they were not consulted, and had little idea what this involved. The use of subliminal TV, for example, was known only to Farmer, Bart and Section 2(a) of the Department, who prepared the films. Initially both men felt some misgivings about the extent of their propaganda, but finer feelings gradually eroded under the pressure of events.

Because of his personal involvement, Bart remained uneasy about the effort directed at the Mothers Homes. Obviously, Mums were particularly susceptible to TV. By "arrangement" with the BBC and ITV,

programmes were adjusted so that on four evenings a week, at peak times, both offered entertainment of "low female interest content." On BBC, perhaps a hoary Western on one channel, an archaeological lecture on the other. On ITV, a football match. At these times the Homes closed-circuit network (all Homes were linked by land lines via MOH Control) would have "Mothers Hour." This was a melange of suitable fashions and dressmaking, inter-Home quizzes and audience participation games. And all of it was in colour, still a great novelty outside. By this means a good ninety percent of the Mums were induced to watch their "very own programme," and at the same time the illusion of freedom of choice was preserved. And always, by the odd phrase here and there, by implication and sometimes by straightforward statement, the point was made; "Mums are special. You are special. Only the best is good

enough for you."

Inter-Home TV news also clashed with BBC and ITV bulletins and was always shown in dining halls and recreation rooms. The news was much the same as outside, but the emphasis was different. Outside, some public event – say, the Lord Mayor's Show – might be the main item, a bad air crash getting little coverage. On the Home circuit this order would be reversed. The impression was fostered that outside was a rather grim place, full of dangers not found in Mothers Homes. Mothers Homes were safe, happy and secure... almost cosy.

Chapter Thirteen

It was nearly four months before the Premier's doctors pronounced him fit to resume office. There were numerous provisos about adequate rest, freedom from strain and other counsel.

In those four months Bart had seen a good deal of his chief. He had always respected and admired Farmer; now there was added a genuine affection. In his turn, the Premier who liked Bart, now regarded the shy and lonely Minister of Regeneration as a son, and had a deeper insight into his complex

nature.

In early December Bart handed back the reins, thankful, yet at the same time, strangely reluctant. As M of R he was now officially recognised as the second in command. Bart heartily disliked his new title, and as far as he could worked as Minister of Health.

Farmer suggested Bart might like to take over the Chancellor's house, No. 11, but Bart was horrified. He did not need it, nor the prestige. Indeed he had grown very tired of his solitary life in Stanhope Mews, and as for Downing Street — .

It was shortly after this suggestion had been turned down that Bart had one of his infrequent encounters with Mrs. H. He said something about the house being too big.

With several apologetic declarations that she did not want to intrude, diversified by frequent unobtrusive adjustments to her teeth, she said she "happened to know" of a flat that was coming vacant in nearby Queen's Gate. She thought it "might suit." The present owners were regulars of hers.

Bart was most anxious to conceal any move from Julia, and one stumbling block was the need to retain the same telephone number. It would be an easy matter to arrange its transfer to another telephone in the same exchange area, but another area was, he knew, technically difficult. Mrs. H told him the flat was on the same exchange.

"Very nice people, sir," she said confidentially. "He's a gentleman in the City; very nice. His wife's very particular, mind you. Likes everything just so, but

she's very nice too." She added reflectively, "Once you get to know her. Clean as a new pin, it is. Wouldn't need no decoration or anything."

Bart had a shrewd suspicion that Mrs. H had thought about a move before he had. He looked at her with greater interest.

"You think I should move, don't you?"

"Well sir, it's not for me to say, I'm sure, but — yes, I do." She flicked some imaginary dust off the table. "You'll never be happy here alone, and with poor dear Mrs. Bart..."

"Yes," said Bart hastily, "you think this flat would be the place for me?"

"Sure of it, sir!" Mrs. H was all

eagerness. "I happen to know they'd sell the place lock, stock and barrel as the saying is. Save you a lot of trouble." It was delicately put.

Bart eyed her affectionately. "You're a crafty old woman, Mrs. H! All right; arrange for me to see it. Remember one thing; I don't want my wife to know now, or ever."

So Bart moved, and saw another facet of the new age. The Stanhope Mews house did not sell immediately, as he had expected. Demand for houses was falling off, the agent said. It was several months before it was sold, and then at a considerable loss. The flat, two bedrooms, a large living room, kitchenette and bath suited him very well. Never keen on entertaining, Bart now had neither the time nor the inclination for any sort of social life, and the cool, impersonal flat was, for him,

ideal.

After his ill-starred visit to Clacton in September, Bart decided he would not go again until he was reasonably certain of an uninterrupted weekend. There was no possible chance in October; November was even worse. Several times he missed his evening call to Julia during the height of the BAOR crisis.

This arose over Farmer's decision to bring forward the date of withdrawal of all British forces. The decision was the Premier's, but Bart had to carry it out. Bart, who had his eye on the estimated two thousand fertile women, wives and daughters of the troops, told the West German Government of the intention. They objected strongly, and the wives echoed their objections. Some couples disappeared into East Germany. A few, a very few, heroic women had

volunteered to return to the UK, but the majority was most unwilling. Morale slipped badly. For a time there was a state of near-mutiny. Bart flew out to address troops and their families and found himself confronted with an almost impossible position. The men knew that soon after their return most of them would be discharged from the Army and be faced with a cold and hard civilian existence. This did not add to their loyalty. In addition the attitude of the German people was becoming increasingly hostile. In thirty years many businesses had been founded on the prosperity and trade the British Army had brought.

For nearly a week Bart toured the units scattered over the chill, damp plains of north-western Germany. The strain was immense. TV was bad enough, but to face row upon row of sullen faces... Bart lacked the ability to make the ice-breaking joke.

All he could do was to say, awkwardly, what he had to say, sustained only by the knowledge that he was right. Night after night he would sink with relief into some strange bed, depressed and spent.

He finally achieved a compromise with the troops and the Germans. The withdrawal would be spread over two years instead of one. Women would not be required to return except with their men. But he made it plain that refusal to go when ordered, or desertion, would mean instant discharge from the Army, loss of British citizenship, and confiscation of all UK property. In the future pay would be credited to British banks, and no withdrawals would be permitted over £10 without the written authority of the unit CO.

Bart flew back bitterly angry with himself because he had not achieved more. The

assurances of his Cabinet colleagues that no one could have done better meant nothing.

So a slow trickle of women began to come home. As they had never been subjected to the drug, their fertility rate was up to the pre-PROLOX standard. Bart watched the figures hungrily. It was some consolation for the dilemma they posed. On the one hand it was scant encouragement to the remainder if he drafted them straight into the Homes. On the other, it was likely to cause resentment if he did not. There was also the very real risk of clashes with the more virulent elements in the Woman's Union. He chose the first course, and much as he did not like it, imposed a strict censorship on any news regarding the returning women, particularly between the UK and BAOR.

By the time Farmer took over the situation was in hand. BAOR had settled down uneasily to the routine.

Bart, tense and strained by his stewardship, and especially the BAOR affair, was not fit to cope with his private life, and knew it. He might have taken a weekend in early December, but could not face it. For the first time since his marriage, he would spend a weekend alone.

It was a fateful decision, in that it led to a seemingly trivial episode that was to have a lasting, if not profound, effect upon Bart's attitude to several things.

He awoke late on Saturday morning. Earlier in the week he had told Mrs. H that he would be going down to Clacton, and had failed to tell her he had changed his

mind. So Mrs. H did not arrive at her usual time and he overslept. It was nearly nine o'clock, and the grey light of a winter's day peered round the edges of the curtains. He tried to lie in bed, but he found himself wondering if he had done the right thing in not going, and when he tried to think of other matters, the matters were inevitably work.

He got up, tired and irritable, and made coffee. He decided he could not be bothered to boil an egg, although he had not had any supper the night before. Mrs. H, thinking he would be in Clacton, had not provided any.

Waiting for the coffee, he ate a piece of bread and butter, cursing softly at the hardness of the butter and blamed Mrs. H for leaving it in the fridge. The coffee ready, he poured it in a jug, splashed in some

milk, added sugar from a packet and stirred the mixture with the breadknife. He found a cup – he could not bother with a saucer – lounged into the livingroom and slumped down in an armchair.

His eyes searched the room for something he might vent his illtemper on. Anything.

Those damned shelves round the fireplace... what on earth had they been for? Far too weak for books. That City gent and his particular wife must have had a hell of a lot of ornaments... what was on those shelves... concentrate... not books... books... schools... National Schools...

Bart opened his eyes, frowning. Suddenly it seemed important to remember what had been on the shelves. It was a relief to remember. Plates. Chinese plates – Ming or

Soo or Bang or something.

He got up and went to the window. Not, he thought, much of a view. About fifteen feet away a vast blank flank wall, the cracked cement rendering wet and streaked with soot. It was raining again. Was it raining in Clacton? Had to get straightened out before going there again. He remembered the coffee, and poured a cup. It tasted filthy.

This, he decided, would not do. Have a shower, dress and go for a walk; never mind the rain. Do some shopping. Go to Harrods and get a present for Julia. He felt better at once.

Half an hour later he was on his way down in the lift. The lofty entrance hall and the rather grand staircase which he never used

— his was a top-floor flat — reminded him that once this had been a private house, occupied by one family and their servants. Four floors and a basement, all full of people in one family, an age unbelievably remote...

Sheltering under the white painted portico was a detective. Bart, anxious to preserve his out-of-routine frame of mind, spoke instead of giving his usual nod.

"Rotten morning, Officer." He surveyed the streaming road, the line of cars parked down the middle of the broad road. Not many children, but cars —

"It is that, sir."

"Well, you needn't bother with me this morning. I'm only going to do a little shopping..." He stopped, noting the

detective's wooden expression.

"I've got my orders, sir."

"Yes," replied Bart pensively, "haven't we all?" His fragile good humour collapsed, he turned and set off down the slight slope to the Cromwell Road. Few people were walking, and all were far too intent on getting out of the rain to notice him. It made the shock all the greater when he entered Harrods.

Almost immediately he was recognised. Not that anyone spoke, but he had enough experience to recognise the casually turned head, the stare, not quite at him, the sudden whisper. Sharply Bart turned into the perfume and cosmetics department, now much less exotic, featuring lavender water and eau de cologne. He studied one counter, but thoughts of buying anything

were driven from his mind as he saw the assistant's haughty stare quicken with interest.

He turned abruptly and strode farther into the store and found himself in the butchery department.

Bart stopped momentarily to get his bearings. A woman shopper bumped into him. She looked up to apologise; she stared at him, her lips slightly parted.

He headed for the man's shop.

The assistant, an exquisite young man who tried, with some success, to give the impression that he was filling in time between Eton and Oxford, eyed him without visible emotions.

"May I help you, sir?"

The relief was immense. At last someone who did not spend all his spare time watching TV. "I want a hat."

"Yes, sir – what sort had you in mind?"

"Sort? Oh, that will do." Bart pointed to a display of near Tyrolean creations.

"Of course, sir. What size?"

It was years since Bart had bought a hat. He had no idea. He grabbed one. Too small. Another. Not too bad, a little large, no bad fault.

"This one."

Bart paid for the hat. Putting it on before a

mirror he saw the reflection of his assistant urgently poking a colleague in the ribs. Bart could have killed him.

He turned out of the man's shop and up the escalator. With the hat well drawn down, and his collar turned up he could relax; might look rather odd, but certainly less easy to identify.

For ten minutes he was moderately at ease in the book department. He selected a book and held it out to an elderly female assistant, but he saw her expression... he dropped the book on the counter and practically ran down the escalator and out into the friendly rain.

For perhaps half an hour he trudged aimlessly, head well down, with no clear idea of where he was going. He must have

gone round in circles, for when he did look up, he was outside a Lyons teashop near the top of Sloane Street. The sight reminded him that he was hungry. He turned and beckoned to his patient shadow, and pressed a wet ten-shilling note in the man's hand.

"I'm hungry. Let's go in here. You get the food."

The detective gave him a commiserating look. "OK, sir. What would you like?"

Bart had not been at Lyons since his student days. "Oh, egg on toast and some tea. You have whatever you want."

As they went in, the detective said, hesitantly, "Begging your pardon sir, but you wouldn't be trying to give me the slip?"

"Christ, no!" Bart's uncertain temper flamed momentarily. "No, Officer. I didn't eat last night, and I had a piece of bread for breakfast. I feel tired, I want to sit down, and I want something to eat. Satisfied?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, but you understand..."

"I understand all right," said Bart with great feeling. He pointed to a vacant table. "I'll be over there. I won't run away."

So the second most powerful man in the United Kingdom, furtively and in some haste, ate his egg on toast amid the clatter and bustle of a Lyons teashop, under the sympathetic eye of his escort – or keeper.

By the time Bart got out into the street again he was so hypersensitive he

imagined all eyes were on him. He got the detective to hail a cab, and returned with relief to his flat.

He flung his dripping hat in one corner and flopped down in a chair and tried to analyse his state of mind. He had been near panic in Harrods. After all, he had been well known for over a year, and while he had never liked it, he was used to being recognised, but now... There was one big difference, he concluded. To begin with, he was now alone. That was a very big difference. Also his life for months had steadily contracted into an almost monastic seclusion. He worked in his familiar office a lot of the time – ate a good many of his meals there too – a car took him home, or anywhere else. Even addressing a meeting he was, in a sense, isolated from his audience. Anyway, that was work. He expected to be known. Now he realised

that since Farmer's illness he was universally known, that he could not hope to do the most ordinary things – buy a paper, have a drink in a pub – without being recognised. Always he would be conscious of the people around him, the knowing nudge... 'Don't let him see you looking, but that's Bart over there. Looks miserable (or happy). No wonder, with his wife in a Home...' There would be silly, predictable jokes. The half-hidden grins, the odd outright laugh. At that moment Bart conceived a deep and enduring dislike for people en masse.

Bart grabbed the phone and called Julia. There was no reply. He rang the Home.

"Sorry, sir. Mrs. Bart is on duty at the moment in the labour ward. Shall I..."

Bart slammed the phone down. He called

the Flavells. They had gone away for the weekend.

Half-past twelve on a cold, wet Saturday afternoon in winter. Sitting huddled in his coat, he felt utterly wretched, mentally exhausted, hating humanity. Above all, hating himself. Moving a leg, he knocked over the jug of cold coffee. He fought down a strong impulse to smash the jug against the wall. Instead he got up, fetched a bottle of whiskey and a glass. He kicked the jug to one side and sat down again, staring at the black stain on the red carpet.

He was still staring at the patch when the short winter's day ended, the room was dark, shadowy. And the bottle half empty.

For the next fortnight Bart plunged desperately into his work. With Farmer

back in office, he should have relaxed a little. Instead, he was deep in the child conscription scheme.

Miss Parkins, closer to him than most, detected a faint suspicion of keenness — pleasure was too strong a word — in his approach to this problem. About half the nation's children were still outside the Schools. Given a free hand by the Premier, Bart made it clear he intended getting the rest in by the end of the Christmas holidays.

He approved a poster campaign designed to drive in the waverers. Arrangements were made with the police that when a child was killed in a road accident, the body was not to be moved until it was photographed. Ghastly, full-colour posters appeared all over the country. All bore the caption, "Another child who died because

he (or she) was not in a National School."

M.P.'s and the newspapers were inundated with protesting letters. Even Farmer, who firmly supported his Minister of Regeneration in public, was unhappy, less certain, in private. He said so.

"Good!" Bart was cold, defensive. "They're not supposed to add to the nation's gaiety."

Farmer let that pass. "Are you getting results?"

"Yes. It's hitting the difficult group, the parents with children under ten."

"Still, some of them are rough. That one of a child's head crushed under a wheel..."

"It was a damned sight rougher on the child!" flared Bart. "For the sake of some half-baked woman's filthy, selfish self-love – love, they call it!" He could not go on.

His bitter rage shocked Farmer. Its suddenness, and the near-fanatical look in Bart's eyes disturbed him.

"All right, John." Farmer spoke quietly. "Don't try to pick a fight with me."

"Sorry, George." Bart shook his head. "I know I'm less tolerant, but they must see... and if they're wilfully blind, it's up to me to open their eyes. I know; you think that as we are starting conscription so soon the campaign has no point. I don't agree. We're getting more of the younger ones in, we're building up in the parents a sense of guilt, and when compulsion starts, they will have some small consolation."

Farmer changed the subject. "Not saying you need a rest, so don't fly off at me, but you'd better remember my recent experience. Sure, you're a lot younger. All the same, try to ease down. No! Shut up!" He held up an admonitory hand. "These repatriation talks with New Zealand. You could represent me. Have a few days in the sun..."

"No!" Bart snapped. Then he sighed. "No thank you, George. I'm hoping to go down to Clacton for a few days over Christmas. That's all the change I need." His tone belied his words.

Bart did his very best to lay aside all his cares and anxieties when he went down to the Home on Christmas Eve. His Christmas shopping, such as it was, had been done by Mrs. H. There was a

compact sewing machine of Swiss make for Julia – Bart knew that no more would be imported – and a twin-set for Matron. The latter was a present from Julia, who had given her own rigid instructions about size and colour. For the rest, there were a few bottles of wine and an assortment of skin foods and other cosmetics which Bart knew were dear to Julia's heart – and also fast vanishing from the open market.

She was on duty when he arrived, and for a time her husband poked around the living room, feeling like an interloper. The room was bright and fresh, full of reminders of Julia. A roll of knitting in a chair, beside yet another novel about Mary, Queen of Scots.

Bart frowned at the sight of himself, silver-framed on the writing desk, a votive offering of anemones before him.

There were sprigs of holly behind the pictures, a sprig of mistletoe over the door leading to the bedroom. A tray of glasses and bottles on top of the TV gave the final touch of restrained festivity. But something was missing. It was only when he glanced in the desk that he knew what it was. There were a dozen or so Christmas cards stuffed carelessly in a pigeonhole.

"Darling, darling, John! I've waited so long for this, and then I have to be on duty!" Julia practically threw herself in his arms.

"Hello, my dear," said Bart lamely. He kissed her — she smelt of antiseptic and faint perfume. They stood back and looked at each other.

"You look thinner, John, are you eating properly?"

John nodded, and replied in as light a tone as he could muster, "I can't say the same for your figure, my dear."

Ruefully Julie smoothed her skirt over her swelling stomach.

"Pig! Be fair. After all, I'm five months gone with my first gift to the nation." She spoke in a cheerful and unresentful voice, but her husband jumped as if he had been stung. Fortunately Julia was, at that moment, regarding herself in a looking glass.

"What's the matter, darling? You look quite pale!"

Bart forced a laugh. "It's the reflected light off all that white uniform!"

Julia brightened, and her face under the perky nurse's cap looked as it had when first they met.

"Like it?"

"Suits you marvellously!" Still so damned young...

"Well, make the most of it. I'm off duty until Boxing Day, and I'm going to change now." She kissed him impulsively and went off singing into the bedroom.

Bart sank down into a chair, his smile gone. Julia had said "gift to the nation," her tone easy and natural, and in no way ironical or sarcastic... Bart knew that phrase; Section 2(a) had written it.

It was not quite the Christmas Bart had visualised. He had not, for example, expected to be taken to a Christmas Eve party, but with the evidence of Julia's indoctrination mounting, it at least afforded him some respite from the disordered whirl in his mind.

Clearly Julia loved it, and that was the main compensation. Yet the very fact that she should be so keen... Bart suffered – and knew it – from the severe defect of frequently seeing both sides of a question. It was a defect he consciously fought in his Ministry. Most of his staff had no idea that the Minister, so calm and deliberate in action, was inwardly at war with himself, sternly suppressing what he inevitably thought of as his more liberal, more humane, instincts. Here, he could allow himself to view matters through Julia's eyes, to see her side.

It was a medical staff party. Home doctors and nurses, including a few Mums, who, like Julia, were trained nurses. For Bart it was a familiar ambience, and once the constraint at his presence had worn off, he could imagine he was back in his early hospital days as a house surgeon. The same horrific medical jokes, the same jargon...

"Evening, Minister!" Matron, miraculously transformed in a silk dress, boomed in his ear. "Glad you could come; hope you're enjoying it? Good. I'm very glad Mrs. Bart has settled down so well. She's a very keen type – Doctor Bates is very pleased with her."

It crossed Bart's mind that Doctor Bates would be a brave man to say anything else. Matron read his thoughts.

"No, really! She's an absolute model," she added thoughtfully. "Wish I could say the same about all of them."

Her change of tone interested Bart. "Trouble?"

Matron did not look up. She shook her head, and continued to gaze with, Bart felt, excessive interest into her glass of South African sherry. "Let's not talk shop now, Minister. We can all do with a break, and speaking as a doctor, I would venture to say that includes you."

Without the two or three drinks he had had, Bart might well have flared up. "Speaking as a doctor, I'd agree with you. But this trouble..."

Matron guided him to what passed as a quiet comer. "Just because a woman is fertile, it does not automatically make her a plaster saint. Home harmony is not too easy to preserve. We have our quota of thieves, cheats..." She gestured impatiently, the sherry swilling dangerously in her glass. "Come on, Minister, we must circulate." She half turned, paused, her tone was more businesslike than inviting. "Would you care to take a glass at my place on Boxing Day morning? Just a few of the senior staff, y'know – that is if your wife can spare you."

Bart got the message, Julia was not invited. "That would be very nice," he said with polite formality. "What time?"

"Oh, eleven thirty-ish would be fine."

He tried to sound enthusiastic, "I'll look

forward to that."

"Jolly good, Minister." Again she read his thoughts, going on with a touch of embarrassment, "Be a bit dull for Mrs. Bart — as a matter of fact, I believe some of the younger set are throwing a party at the same time."

One thing was clear, Matron was a born organiser.

Christmas Day, raw, cold and foggy. Seagulls wheeled and pounced on scraps, their discordant screams, a high untuneful descant to a distant lowing foghorn.

The Barts lay long in bed, cramped but happy in her three-foot divan. He was incapable of making love, barred by a pregnancy which was not his. Instinctively

Julia realised this, and accepted the situation with her newfound philosophical, easy grace. It amazed Bart, and as they dressed he tried to bring the matter into the open, to apologise.

Julia was studying herself carefully in the looking glass as he emerged from the bathroom.

"Julia, my dear."

"Yes, John?" She answered absently, much preoccupied by the hang of her skirt. It did not seem a very propitious moment, but Bart had a flair for choosing unpropitious moments.

"Julia, I just wanted to say how sorry I am that I'm such a dull fellow in bed these days..."

She turned, her smile was warm, understanding. It changed into a shriek of laughter as his towel came undone and dropped to the floor. "John darling you're such a fool! It just serves you right for putting the thing on." She walked over and laid her cool hands on him. "Darling, please don't go putting on towels for my benefit. I know what you look like, and I think you quite beautiful. As for what you were trying to say – forget it. It's just another part of the price we all have to pay. Never mind. It really isn't that important, and we'll have a simply lovely time in the spring." She kissed him, and went on easily, "Golly! That talcum you're using is pretty super, what is it – Old Driftwood?" She let him go, and returned to the looking glass. "Now, tell me, John, d'you think this looks too dressy for the dining hall?"

Bart was forced again and again to the conclusion that her attitude was quite genuine. His propaganda, plus the incident outside Harrods, had had a fundamental effect on her attitude to the outside world. Her philosophical acceptance of his inability as a lover was genuine, and hurt. Then again, there was the question of their child. Both of them had preserved a conspiracy of silence about her. Julia had deliberately cultivated the Roman matron attitude, which was very understandable. She seldom spoke of her, and never brought the subject up herself. Significantly, she never referred to her daughter as "Diana," always "poppet."

"Oh yes, poppet's wonderful. Thriving away like anything."

Bart understood this. He too made no attempt to see the child after the first month

or so. But to accept the loss of her child, her outside life and her husband as a lover, and to accept it, not with sad resignation, but with an air that these things, however nice, desirable, were now in the past – This was a new life, and comparison was pointless. Moreover, this was, in some ways an exciting life for the "in" people. There was a satisfying job to be done. The unborn descendants of Shakespeare, Milton, Drake and Nelson, Darwin and all the rest cried out for life, and only the Mums could give it... Not that Julia said all this in so many words – in any case, much of it had originated in the Ministry's propaganda branch – but it was clear she believed it, almost as a religious revelation. To Bart it was very frightening indeed; he watched for other evidence of subliminal indoctrination, but she did not repeat the "gift to the nation" phrase.

Dressing, Bart tried to disentangle the many factors that made up his wife's state of mind, but it was all too complex, and he gave it up. He thought of other Mums he had seen, recalling the midnight service Julia had insisted they attend. Secretly, Bart found the whole thing dreary beyond words, but looking round the dim-lit chapel, he had felt humble before the quiet faith of the hundred or so Mums. His mood had changed to irritation as he listened to their voices, swooping lovingly up and down the sugary slopes of "Silent Night"... yet they might be right, the material, so carefully constructed in his "publicity" department, might be right...

Christmas dinner was all paper hats and crackers. The Barts shared a table with three Mums and one husband. They were an ill-assorted group. One woman, a girl really, had become firm friends with Julia in

the labour room, and afterwards in adjoining beds. Bart noted that neither spoke of their babies. He did his best to be convivial, buying wine for his table and trying to keep the flow of chatter going, but it was understandable that none of his fellow diners could forget that this was The Man. Bart knew that his lightest remark might be regarded as significant. He tried to pass the ball to the other man, but without success.

The ice was to some extent broken when a Mum at a nearby table announced loudly that she was in labour. She added, with flushed bonhomie, that she had hoped to enjoy her Christmas dinner in peace, but now it was clear to her that she was not going to make it, and, seeing that it was Christmas Day, she did not propose walking to the labour ward. Amid cheers, a stretcher was brought, and she was carried

out triumphantly to the lusty singing of the Home's own version of "Knees up, Mother Brown." The evident good spirit of the Mums, even allowing for the Christmas cheer, impressed Bart. They had a solidarity amounting almost to an esprit de corps. He returned to his interrupted dinner with more understanding of the friendship between Julia and the ex-shop assistant. More understanding, but less personal comfort.

The Matron's sherry party gave him something more to think about, something he found even less comforting.

Her sitting room, pale green walls and flowered chintz-covered furniture, was quite full when Bart arrived.

Matron, now resplendent in Julia's gift twin-

set and tweed skirt, gripped his arm firmly and steered him, nodding and smiling, through the crush to one corner.

"Good of you to come, Minister." She produced a glass of sherry, all ready on a silver-frame filled side table. Bart had a feeling that this was all carefully stage-managed, a feeling that grew when she raised a beckoning finger and her eyebrows to a tall, cadaverous man standing nearby. For one ostensibly lost in admiration of a coloured photograph of the Duomo in Florence at sunset, his reaction was remarkably rapid.

Matron breathed confidentially in Bart's ear.

"Like you to meet Doctor Parsons; splendid chap."

The splendid chap joined them, giving Bart a nervous, guilty smile. They shook hands.

"Bill Parsons is my right-hand man," said Matron. "We were at U.C.H. together. He can put you in the picture rather better than I can."

It was Bart's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"It's this question of Home harmony, Minister," Matron lowered her voice slightly. "Getting to be a bit of a headache." She laughed unconvincingly. "As I told you the other day, they're not all saints, and this is a problem that is bound to end up on your plate. Thought you might like to get it straight from the horse's mouth."

Matron used the term "Home harmony" quite naturally, but it stuck in Bart's throat.

Matron slapped Parsons on the shoulder. Clearly she did not want to take part in any discussion. She had opened the meeting, and was keen to be off. "Over to you, Bill. I must see that the rest are happy." She ploughed back into the throng.

Doctor Parsons spoke in a high, clear, fluty voice. "It's really quite simple, Minister. We have here about three thousand women. Perhaps one percent are not entirely amenable to discipline. That means thirty troublemakers, not a lot, but enough in a tight, enclosed community like this."

Bart was pleased he called it "discipline" and not "harmony." He said so, and went on, "Frankly, I'm agreeably surprised that you put the figure as low as one percent."

"It is low," admitted Parsons, "but I am

allowing for others who, although a bit of a nuisance at times, are gradually accepting the reorientation. The one percent are the hard cases who will never come into line."

"When you say troublemakers, what sort of trouble do you mean?"

Parsons waved a deprecating hand. "A lot of it seems minor, but this is a small community. Some are born agitators. 'Why should mothers be expected to work in the camp' is a favourite. Then some are thieves, and that really is serious – it strikes at the very root of the community spirit. Then the back-biting..."

"Don't tell me that the rest don't gossip!"

"Oh no, I don't mean that." Parsons stared for a moment at his drink. He looked up, and shook his head. "You can have no

idea, Minister, of the sort of things they dream up." He looked down again quickly. "To give you one example. There is a rumour being spread right now that you don't take the sterile test, that your wife's children are yours..."

Bart was speechless for a moment, then, "Of all the..."

Parsons looked up, grinned nervously, "Yes, I know, Minister. But from our point of view there is worse to follow. It is being said that if you have enough money, you can fix a similar arrangement with the camp staff."

"Good God!" said Bart. "Sheer maliciousness!"

"It's malicious all right," agreed Parsons.

"Some of it is silly, but damnably dangerous. Some rumours we cannot trace, but we pin down a surprising number of them, and they all come from the one percent. The strange thing is that once they are pregnant, most of them are quite reasonable, but during recuperation, and the first month or so of pregnancy..." He looked in supplication at the ceiling.

Bart spoke almost to himself. "It's extraordinary. I'd expected that we might have masses of women hammering on the gates to be let out. Instead I find the bulk of the women surprisingly cheerful, almost frighteningly susceptible to our indoctrination. My own wife..." he broke off. That was something he could not discuss. He changed direction, "What are you doing about it?"

Parsons grimaced, shrugged. "That is why

I'm bothering you, Minister. I do not imagine that our experience is any different to any other camps, and it is getting to be a real problem, believe me. May I put it this way? What would you do?"

Bart frowned, "Well, I suppose you've tried talking to them."

"Yes, we've done that." Parsons sighed at some unpleasant memory. "I'm sure you know the sort of mentality we're dealing with, and can you see that doing much good?"

Bart did not answer. Parsons went on.

"There is so little you can do. If you stop their pocket money it is a greater incentive to steal. Withdraw privileges? Stop them going to bingo? They'd laugh at you. We

did think of making them wear a special, distinctive dress, but all these measures presuppose a system of control which we do not have — or want to have. Identity cards, ration cards, tickets for shows. The whole thing would get more and more like the Services, and would do more harm than good." Parsons fingered his now empty glass. "And we can't turn them over to the law outside. For a start, their fear of the steriles is a power factor in reconciling them to this life, and we cannot afford to lose any productive effort."

Bart's glass was empty too, and he wanted a drink. "Well, Doctor, you've certainly given me something more to think about. This is a tricky one."

"Tricky, yes. But I think there is one simple answer, much as I, personally, don't like it."

"And that is?"

"Corporal punishment."

Again Bart did not answer. Now he understood why Matron was so keen to leave.

Bart returned to London in a very curious state of mind. Julia, the Parsons episode, the evident success of the Ministry's propaganda with most of the Mums, each subject crossed and recrossed his mind. His parting with Julia had, for him, a hint of flatness. Now for the first time, he wondered if she was, consciously or unconsciously, getting back at him in her attitude. Whereas previously his departure had been a dreadful moment of separation, on this occasion it had coincided with Julia going on duty. Superficially, their leave-

taking had seemed no less intense, yet he was aware that Julia was eager to get to work, he had not missed the surreptitious glance at her watch...

Hunched up in his overcoat he stared out at the chilling grey scene of a winter dawn, the car swishing through the sleet. He pictured Julia, bright and cheerful in the warm, inevitably optimistic atmosphere of a maternity ward – and felt guilty that he was not more pleased with the vision. He switched quickly to Parsons.

Perhaps solitary confinement? Many objections to that; the very idea of cells in the camp, and what of the effect of such treatment on the woman's health? A special camp for the hard cases? That would be too drastic, and there would be staff difficulties, and if Parsons was right that these problem women were

reasonable when pregnant, what about the effect of hard-case women, not in production, on those who were? Bart returned from his holiday very unrefreshed.

Immediately he saw Miss Parkins' set expression, he knew there was more trouble. His frayed temper flared.

"All right, Miss Parkins – just let me get my coat off, will you?"

Her expression did not alter. She left, returning with a cup of coffee. Bart gave her a quick apologetic smile. "Sorry."

Miss Parkins' expression softened very little, but she inclined her head a fraction.

Bart sipped the coffee with evident pleasure. "Well, tell me the worst!"

"I am very sorry," she said simply, and handed him a message.

Mary and Roger Flavell, returning from the country, had had a car smash. Mary was injured – how badly was not yet known – but one thing was certain. Roger Flavell was dead.

Chapter Fourteen

Bart had an early appointment with the Premier, and left Miss Parkins to get details of the accident.

Although Bart had never been particularly close to his brother-in-law, he was deeply shocked. He walked with unusual slowness to Downing Street, oblivious of everything. Roger Flavell, smooth and urbane, clever yet kindly, was dead. No more would the sun warm that bronzed face...

Someone relieved him of his overcoat, and

he nodded absently. He would have to tell Julia. That, he decided thankfully, could wait – it all must wait. He wrenched his mind off the subject, and went into the Prime Minister's study.

"Morning, John." Farmer hesitated. Bart suspected that it was on the tip of the Premier's tongue to ask him if he had enjoyed his holiday. "Sit ye down."

Bart sat down in the chair he knew was carefully placed opposite the Premier. There was none of the clutter usually found on statesmen's desks, no signed portraits, no silver inkstand or blotting pad. The sole permanent feature was a large brass ashtray, which moved around as required. Not that Farmer went to the other extreme, maintaining a clear desk. Farmer's desk was a worktable, not a prop for his personality. The absence of the usual

furnishings meant that the desk was not orientated toward the Premier's chair, and if he chose to sit his visitor on the other side, then both were using it and there was the unspoken suggestion that they were working together as equals. This privilege was reserved only for the Chancellor and Bart. All others sat in the chair beside the desk, where they might be treated with anything ranging from sharp geniality to a very good impression of Moses handing down the Tablets of the Law.

The Premier thumbed through a red-striped folder, and produced a green sheet of paper which he flicked across the desk. "There," he said carelessly. "That's a nice warmer-upper to start the week."

Bart knew red-striped folders and green paper. Both had become all too familiar when he had sat in the Premier's chair, and

the flaring red "Top Secret" on the paper came as no surprise. The stripes meant Intelligence, and green was reserved solely for PROLOX material.

PROLOX INTELSUM 34/74. Intelsums 27/73, 45/73 and 10/74 refer. The suspected use of PROLOX in HARLEM, NEW YORK confirmed.

Some evidence to indicate that it was administered by militant rightwing white movement via local cola bottling plant. The recent coloured raid on downtown MANHATTAN stems from this, and the attempt to blow up the PAN AM Building may have been the work of militant black extremists.

2. TAIWAN/FORMOSA now graded Class 3. While no evidence exists, staff appreciation is that HONGKONG must be regarded as Class 3.

Bart drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. There was a loud clanging sound as Farmer knocked out his pipe. "No need to look so damned sad, John. It has to happen."

"No, it's not just that, although God knows that is bad enough, but I am getting weary..."

"Who isn't?" retorted Farmer sharply. "Your trouble is you are so busy with immediate problems, you do not see the big overall picture..."

"Yes, I know," Bart nodded, "I'm parochial."

Farmer frowned, sucked noisily on his pipe, and stared at Bart. "Um. Well, we'll

get round to your troubles in a minute. You've got to hoist in that the big picture has a big effect on your parish... want you to see my latest toy." He got up and led the way out of the office and down the corridor. He paused before a door. "Took a tip from Churchill." He ushered Bart into a small windowless room, fluorescent light flooded the office, the strip lamps reflected in the highly polished brown linoleum floor. Three walls were covered with government-green rep curtains. Against the fourth wall, which contained the door, was a large grey metal desk. A teleprinter stood on one side of its olive-green top. At the desk sat a neatly dressed man, who started to rise as they entered.

"No, don't get up, Manningham." The Premier turned to Bart. "This is Commander Manningham, duty map officer. There are two others, and their job

is to keep this lot," he waved in the direction of the curtains, "up to date, and to inform me of any particular item they think I ought to know. Most of the material is T/P'd on that machine from DGI."

Bart nodded at the Naval man, who gave him a bleak, professional smile, and returned to his paper work.

"This is the big broad picture," went on Farmer. He pulled a cord at one side and the curtains on one wall slid back, to reveal a large map of the world which covered the entire wall.

At first glance it looked like a map of a new and strange British Empire. The United Kingdom was coloured red, as was part of south-east Europe, Malta, Sicily. There were thick red rings round Lisbon, Tel Aviv, Cairo, and farther east, one round

Singapore. Planted on the projection-distorted wastes of Greenland was a Perspex tablet, bearing the legend "PROLOX, Class 1. Updated to..." And neatly inserted in black Chinagraph was "1200Z, 25.12.74."

"Now take a look at this." Farmer reached up and pulled a transparent plastic blind down. It fitted neatly over the map, clipping at the bottom.

"That lot were the certainties," said Farmer. "This is the Class Two overlay, the probables. DGI is very hard to convince – and rightly so – but personally I regard these certainties too."

The map looked very different now. There was an irregular patch over the best part of Belgium.

"We think that the Flemings and the Walloons are having a go at each other." His thick finger moved across to Berlin. The city was ringed. "Now I wonder who did that?"

Bart looked sharply at his boss, but Farmer's face was devoid of expression. He returned to the map. There was a roughly elliptical area across northern France and western Germany, and nearly half, the southern half, of Italy was red. Farther east, parts of Poland were affected, and to the south, the largest part of the Middle East was coloured.

Bart stared at that area for some time. "I cannot understand why war has not broken out," he said at last.

"Yes," admitted Farmer, lighting his pipe. The faint smell of floor polish was blotted

out. "But remember the evidence of attack grows so slowly. It is one thing to say 'those wicked bastards across the border are going to seize – or have seized – our beloved Ruritania.' There you've got something concrete to stir the masses with, but to tell the average man that his wife is not going to produce any more babies..." He tapped the map with his pipe, "In primitive farming communities, agreed, it would be regarded as disaster, but they are getting less, and who ever heard of politicians taking much notice of poor damned farmers? Then again, I think people realised that no one can afford war now, it is simply too expensive in terms of manpower, never mind cost. There was a time when I was worried about the chances of preemptive nuclear strikes to stop the use of PROLOX, but once we had the formula spread worldwide, that risk disappeared."

Bart stared at the Middle East patch again. "I don't know who struck first, but it is evident the Israelis have taken good care of their neighbours."

"They'd be in a damned poor position if they didn't," said Farmer. He added speculatively, "They'll want watching too. Supposing they appeal to international Jewry — 'Send us your fertile women' approach. Yes," he said slowly, "that would be a damned good idea." He shrugged, "But I can't see anyone letting the women go."

But Bart was concentrating on the map again. Kashmir, West Pakistan and part of southern India were red. Farther south, Java and southern Malaya. Bart's eye swept upward. Cambodia, Vietnam...

Bart spoke at last. "When you see it

presented like this, it is like the spread of a disease..."

"Wait till you've seen this one." The Premier pulled down a second overlay, clipping it carefully in position. "These are the possibles – Class Three."

All France and Germany were red. Patches blotched North and South America like livid fungus.

"Japan!" Bart turned, "I didn't know..."

"No. That really is a new one. Only came in, in the last forty-eight hours." Farmer's short laugh was devoid of humour. "We suspect the Japs don't even know it yet – correct, Manningham?"

"Correct, sir," said Manningham

expressionlessly, and without looking up.

Bart shook his head. "I've seen enough."

Farmer sniffed noisily, but did not comment. He waved a hand at the other green curtains. "These are more detailed maps of the more interesting areas. Right. Come on." Abruptly Farmer left for his office. Behind them, Bart heard Manningham carefully drawing the curtains.

"Now you've seen what I mean by the big picture," said Farmer, slumping carelessly down into his chair.

Free from the inhibiting presence of Manningham, Bart spoke out. "I can't understand how you can be so damned pleased, yes, pleased by all that. It's

horrible – mass genocide!"

"Absolute tripe!" barked Farmer. "I'll not deny there are going to be millions of frustrated women. Hard bloody luck! But we're fighting for survival; don't expect me to burst into tears. All right, we put the weapon in the world's hands, but it was just the dark side of human nature that used it – and will go on using it. Yes, you're right; I'm glad." There was no defiance in the Premier's attitude, just plain, uncompromising certitude. "We're over the hump, PROLOX has gone too far to be contained. World population is imploding. And don't forget this," Farmer wagged a finger at the silent Bart. "World famine before PROLOX was practically a dead cert. By 2000 it would have been here, and that wouldn't be just a matter of frustrated women. When the dust has settled, a lot of the pressure will have gone out of

international politics. Lebensraum wasn't invented by Hitler, and even if we think it an excuse, others have believed it – and still do. Another twenty years and China would have been busting at the seams. And that's another thing. People have been so bloody mesmerised by China, they've overlooked the Indian subcontinent, Japan, Indonesia. No, we were all set for a vast bloodletting, plus the unknown effect of the inevitable nuclear long-term hazard. Right. This is grim – but it's a hell of a lot better than what might have been."

Bart sighed. "Well, certainly it's spreading fast. D'you think it may be contained?"

"Really, John, I wonder whose side you're on. Be your age! Take the Israel/Egypt exchange. I don't know who struck first, and I don't damn well care, but can you imagine that not happening?"

There's not much on the USSR or China, but this is only because their security is too damn' good. We have the smell of it, and I'll lay a small bet with you that they are sorting each other out. No one has friends or allies now. Cast your mind back to our early days; who did we fear? Not Russia, but our NATO allies, neighbours." The Premier flourished a dismissive hand at Bart. "Anyway, you'll have worked out a lot of this for yourself."

"No, No, I have not, and it frightens me. I have been so wrapped up in my own work – the Homes, the Schools, tests, so much – yet I should have seen more of this coming. I've been too single-minded..."

"It's been your great strength, John."

"Yes, that may be, but after all, I did hold down your job temporarily. Even then I

concentrated solely on my own affairs..."

"Your own parish," commented Farmer. "You had no time to think of other things."

"I should have done more, though. It is true that this does not come as a blinding revelation, but so much is obvious." He looked steadily at Farmer. "Do you still think I am the man to understudy you?"

"Yes!" Farmer was decisive. "You're less than fair to yourself. True, you're a bit naive – you wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the old days in politics, the sharks would have had you," he snapped his fingers, "like that. But you're right for this time. I know." He banged his pipe on the ashtray. "Remember this; try not to be so bloody fair to everyone else. The rarest thing in this world is altruism, and you've more than your fair share of it. Think of you a bit

more, accept that you have to do the dirty on someone sometime. This is not medicine in an ivory tower; this is a hard, dirty world, and by God, you have a job to do in it! Think on that."

As Bart got up to go, Farmer went on in a more even tone, "By the way, John, what particular problem is worrying you?"

Bart hesitated, the thoughtful look on his face deepened into hardness. "Thanks for the advice, George. What you say is very true. I've made a few hard decisions in this job, and have paid for them in my own mind. I'll try to be more detached in the future."

"Don't lose your essential humanity," warned Farmer. "That's another of your strong points. And your problem?"

"Is of no importance." Bart's face did not relax.

For several minutes after his caller had left, Farmer sat slowly filling his pipe and staring at the closed door and wondering if he had gone too far. Certainly he had made Bart's mind up for him on one point, but Farmer was not to know that.

Chapter Fifteen

Miss Parkins had done her stuff, tracing Mary to the West London Hospital. Mrs. Flavell had a cut forehead, a dislocated shoulder and was suffering from shock. Otherwise she was unhurt. Miss Parkins added that she had already sent flowers from the Minister, and that the attending physician had Mrs. Flavell under sedation, and suggested that she should not see visitors until the next day.

Bart nodded his thanks, told his secretary to fix a time for him on the following

morning. He was glad of the respite. While he had to agree with Farmer's opinion of him, that 'naive' rankled. He dictated a sharp order to Miss Parkins. A committee was to be formed to consider the enforcement of camp discipline. Each camp was to send one senior staff member. Doctor Parsons of the Clacton Home was to take the chair, and the Minister expected a report within seven days. Miss Parkins pursed her lips and looked thoughtful, but said nothing. Bart reverted to the question of Mary Flavell. He knew her parents were dead, and he had an idea that only Flavell's mother was alive. He called Miss Parkins back.

"I'd like you to find out who Flavell's solicitors are."

"I have already done so. Do you want to speak to them?"

Bart nodded, Miss Parkins nodded back.

The solicitor confirmed that there was a mother, now very old and mentally feeble, living in a nursing home. He also added, at some length and with great legal finesse, that there were no other relations, that Bart was the nearest, if not the only one who might see that the last – ah – rites were, should he say, nondenominational. If, in view of Doctor Bart's position, he did not consider he was able to undertake these sad duties, the solicitor would venture to offer his own services, etc., etc.

Bart said shortly that he knew Flavell was not a Christian and that he was quite capable of arranging the funeral. He replaced the phone while the legal man was still replying – and told Miss Parkins to get on with the funeral arrangements.

Twenty-four hours later he found his sister-in-law over the worst of the shock. The cut was nothing, the shoulder had been dealt with and her doctor was prepared to release her the next day.

She talked quite calmly about Roger's death and insisted that she would attend his funeral. Bart said it was not really necessary, and that he would go anyway, but Mary was adamant.

"No, John." She spoke with finality. "It is the least I can do."

That remark struck Bart as odd, but he let it pass. "Well, my dear, if you insist..."

"John, are you making the arrangements?" He watched a pale hand,

the skin smooth and with the faint yellow tinge of ivory, move restlessly on the white sheet. So like Julia.

"Yes. Mrs. Flavell is senile, you know."

She nodded. "Poor old soul! Fortunately, I think she is beyond grasping anything. I will see her, later." She looked at Bart, almost as if she was seeing him for the first time. "Poor old John too! As if you didn't have enough to cope with!" The hand slid across and grasped his. "I may well forget to say so later, so — thank you." She withdrew her hand quickly, and went on briskly. "Now; tell me the details — when — where?"

Bart played up. "Golders Green, two thirty, Thursday. I'll pick you up — here, or wherever you like." He added as an afterthought, "Of course, I can take you

from the hospital tomorrow."

She shook her head. "No. I do not want to be a complete burden – and in any case, I'd rather go alone – please." She picked at the sheet. "I'll go home Thursday morning, you can call for me at two o'clock."

Golders Green Crematorium is not, reasonably enough, a particularly exciting edifice, and covered by lowering cloud and a fine penetrating rain, did nothing to elevate Bart's spirits. January is a busy month for undertakers, and the priest, who had already conducted the same service eight times that day and would be well into double figures before he went home, was understandably impersonal and dispassionate. He proceeded at a smart pace through the magnificent words of the Order for the Burial of the Dead. Bart, who had an ear for words, winced mentally at the

treatment of "Man that is bom of woman..."
The tone was flat, beaten flat by repetition.

He held Mary's arm at the high point, the almost theatrical moment when, to a faint rumble of rollers, the remains of Roger Flavell, M.D., B.CH., glided slowly through the green curtains.

Outside, they were invited to inspect the wreaths laid out on the sodden grass, but Bart took charge.

"No. Come on, Mary, there is nothing for you here."

Quiet, controlled, Mary looked gravely at him, then got into his car. For five minutes or so there was silence. They sat like strangers, each gazing out on to the grey faces and streets. Mary spoke first.

"John." For all her calmness, there was timidity in her voice. "What are you going to do with me now?"

This was a point that had exercised John ever since the car started. "I thought you might care to go back to your place. Perhaps we could have a cup of tea..." His voice trailed off. It was vastly inadequate. If only there was another woman there — Julia. Julia. In her present frame of mind, thought Bart, she would be small help.

Mary did not answer. She opened her bag, looked inside for no discernible reason, and shut it again with a snap. Bart took her silence as consent, and instructed the driver.

The house was empty when they arrived.

Flavell's small staff were all at the funeral, would have left after Bart and Mary – and, not being Senior Ministers of the Crown, did not have the discreet assistance of the Metropolitan Police with their cars.

Mary led the way straight up to the sitting room. She drew the long curtains, anxious to shut out the grey day. Then she moved to a decanter on the table.

"I don't feel awfully like making tea, John. Personally, I need a drink." She looked inquiringly at Bart.

Bart, uneasy and unsure what to say, said with unnecessary brightness that he would love one. Mary slipped her fur coat off her shoulders, wincing slightly as she did so. Because of her shoulder she had worn it, slung casually round her throughout the service. Now it slipped unheeded onto the

floor.

"No, leave it – and do sit down. There are one or two things I must say." She handed him a drink, and he did as he was told. For a moment or two she walked slowly round the room, took a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece. John looked elsewhere, his gaze fell on the Tanagra figurine in its alcove. When he looked again at Mary, she was removing her hat, giving that same slight shake of the head to free her hair which he had seen Julia do so often. That also seemed long ago...

Mary sat down opposite him. Her face looked brown in contrast to the white strip of sticking plaster on her forehead.

She returned his gaze, smiling faintly at his barely concealed anxiety. "Poor John! All

the cares of state, and now..." She shrugged and winced. "No, I'm all right." Again she paused, and looked reflectively in her glass, swirling the drink gently. "It's difficult to know how to put this, so that you will not misunderstand. On the other hand, it is only fair to tell you, so that you don't waste your sympathy on one who really doesn't deserve it." She gulped at her drink and got up to refill her glass, and spoke with her back to Bart. "You see, it's quite simple. Roger is dead, and I am terribly shocked. He was incredibly alive, vital. Death and Roger were unthinkable partners, yet he is dead. He gave me everything, spoilt me, protected me." She turned and stared squarely at Bart. "And I did not love him. At times I felt guilty – and feel a lot worse now. He knew I did not really love him – no man who is not a fool can be deluded on that point unless he deludes himself – and Roger was not a fool, nor given to selfdeception."

"My dear," began Bart, "you must not..."

"No, let me finish. I have to. I was a lot younger when we met — even younger emotionally. He dazzled me, but not, I think, intentionally. God! But all that is past; it does not matter any more. We were happy, contented. I was a good wife to him, perhaps a better one for the very reason..."

Bart made a halfhearted attempt to speak. She held up a hand to stop him.

"It was a bargain, although it did not set out like that. He loved me, and kept his part. I was fond of him, respected him, and I kept mine. Now he is gone. I am sad, hopelessly at sea, and missing him, but do not imagine I am distracted. God! What a heartless bitch you must think me!"

"No. I admit I am surprised – you always seemed an ideal couple."

"Perhaps we were. Love is not everything." She looked at him intently, "Or would you disagree?"

"I don't know," Bart sighed. "I really don't know."

Mary smiled at him. "Poor John. Anyway, I wanted you to know that I was not in extremis. You have enough without misplaced sympathy." She stood up. "You must be dying to be off back to work. No, I know you a good deal better than you think." She picked up his coat. "One thing I would ask. Give me a ring, will you – please?"

The National Schools were proving a much thornier problem than the Homes. Bereft

parents, chiefly mothers, were hell. Many were content to write letters, pointing out that their sons – daughters got less attention – were delicate, and needed properly aired clothes. Just now, Bart was concerned with the more militant section, a small group of mothers, now sterile, who tried to break into a School in non-visiting hours. One mother was badly injured in a scuffle, and it took his personal intervention to keep that out of the press.

Miss Parkins, who in a coldly efficient way, mothered and protected him, also made sure he did not miss anything. Now she produced, with a cup of coffee, a thick report. Bart knew the signs, and groaned.

"Oh no, don't tell me I must read it!"

Their association varied from the stiffly formal, to a curiously intimate mother-and-

son relationship. Just now it was that end of the scale. She looked sternly at him. "Yes, you must." She marched back to her own office. "I'll see you are not disturbed."

Bart found she was right. It was the first report of the recently formed Ministry of Advanced Planning, a small brain-bank ordered to consider what measures would be needed to maintain a reasonable national economy under future conditions. With the world birthrate plummeting, trade would become chaotic, and the only prudent course would be to aim at self-sufficiency. This was self-evident and the report dealt with the various imports that would not be available, and how they might best be met at home.

Some items needed immediate action if the country was to be ready in time. For example, even the very reduced demand

expected for timber could not be met from home resources, and a big reforestation scheme was proposed. Several thousand acres should be planted yearly, starting at once... Plastics, already ousting iron and steel in many fields, must be further developed... Atomic energy would have to supply all grid power – coal was much too precious for chemicals to be used for fuel. Renewed and intensive effort was needed to perfect an electric battery-powered vehicle, since petroleum products would be scarce. Fortunately, the large natural gas finds of the sixties would ensure national domestic heating and cooking supplies. Meat would be a problem; large-scale sheep farming was envisaged... PROLOX did not have broad-band effectiveness, there were many gaps, inexplicable gaps. Mice were susceptible, rats were not. Wild-fowl, residents of so many reservoirs, had virtually disappeared. Rabbits, still thin on the ground after the ravages of

myxomatosis, seemed to have been wiped out. On the credit side, the grey squirrel had been heavily hit, and the wild mink, curse of the chicken farmer, had, in areas around most reservoirs, been severely depressed.

There was much more in this closely reasoned document, and coming on top of the lecture from the PM, Bart saw that, indeed, his view had been too restricted.

He also realised, guiltily, that it was past eight-thirty, and that he had not rung Julia, or Mary. He hesitated, hand on telephone, then called Julia. Sorry, Mrs. Bart was on duty – was it urgent? Bart said no, and was conscious of a faint but distinct feeling of relief. He telephoned Mary. There was no reply.

He worked on, reading, signing, initialing and now and then, writing a terse directive. Shortly after nine he called Mary again, but there was still no answer. He replaced the handset with unnecessary violence, and was further annoyed to find that he had lost his concentration. He sighed, and stood up, turning to the window.

The lights were still the same. For all that was inexorably building up, Whitehall looked the same, and as permanent as the sun by day. Bart felt tired, hungry. He had a longing for the mahogany splendors of Scotts, but even the thought of the meal he might have there did not overcome his aversion to the public gaze. He sighed again, supper back home was all too predictable. He rang for his car.

It was after ten o'clock before he finally contacted Mary.

"Mary, my dear. I did try earlier. Several times."

She ignored his protestations, her voice was weary. "I've been out. Walking."

Bart had the sense to let that one go. "Have you eaten?"

"Eaten?" She made it sound like a novel idea. "Oh yes. I had a glass of milk and a biscuit. Now I'm in bed."

"Good." Bart slipped almost unconsciously into his professional manner. "I hope you will sleep. Nothing I can say..."

"For God's sake – not that!"

"All right." Bart stuck to his professional style. "I expect you've got some aspirin."

"Aspirin! I've got sleeping pills!"

"Well, try to do without them. Aspirin and hot milk will give you better sleep."

Mary laughed shortly, "Poor old John! There's so much you don't understand."

The echo of Julia was strong, the same voice, then a familiar sentence with the same inflection. "Get some sleep anyway. I'll call you in the morning."

"Yes, John." Her voice had changed, now she was mockingly submissive, "I'm sure you're so right." The edge left her voice, "I have to see Roger's solicitor tomorrow. D'you think you could spare me

an hour tomorrow evening?"

"Of course!" He spoke warmly, "anything I can do. Anything."

"I would like your advice, but you are so busy."

"Nonsense! When shall I come round? Sixish?"

Mary hesitated. "I wondered, if it was more convenient to you, if you would care to come and have supper with me about seven thirty. I don't promise much of a spread..."

Bart thought distastefully of his late supper, and of the value of occupational therapy to Mary. "I'd love to – if it's not too much trouble for you."

"No, it wouldn't trouble me." Again he thought he detected a faint mocking note.

"Splendid. I'll hope to be with you just after seven, subject to all the usual provisos about crises at this end."

"Good. Good night, John. And thank you."

"Good night, Mary."

He put down the phone and looked with mingled repugnance and triumph at his miserable supper. He went to bed, hardly read at all, and was soon asleep. He had completely forgotten to call Julia again.

Bart really enjoyed his dinner the next evening. It was a lot better than he had

been used to of late, and it was wonderful not to eat it alone.

Mary, although tense and clearly controlling herself in some way, gradually relaxed.

She discussed in a straightforward way the winding up of the practice – it was hardly possible to sell it, in the circumstances – and the sale of the house. Money was not one of her problems; Roger had left everything to her, and there was, it appeared, a good deal to leave. Mary had no desire to remain in the house, and although house prices had already fallen considerably, she might expect, Bart said, a good figure from a medical man.

About her future, Mary was decidedly vague. She supposed she would get a flat,

and that too presented no great difficulty, especially if she was prepared to take a fairly large one.

It was indeed a pleasant evening, much better than he had expected. He scowled when he found his car had arrived to take him back, as arranged, for a final visit to his office. From there he went back to his flat, and rang Julia.

For no very good reason he decided not to tell her of Roger's death. In any event, he had little chance. Julia prattled on about some "simply glorious" party they had held to celebrate the first set of quintts the Home had produced. Fertility drugs had made twins or triplets quite average, quads were fairly common, but quintts... Bart was naturally interested; it was good for the Mum's morale, but he would have liked a little more interest in himself. He rang off

with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction.

For two days he heard nothing from Mary. Then she rang to tell him that the house was as good as sold, and that she was off for a few days. She would visit old Mrs. Flavell, and would ring him on her return.

Another three days passed in the same grinding routine. The flat, the office, and then the flat again. Colleagues had almost given up inviting him to dinner parties, knowing he would generally refuse, and was no great asset when he did appear. Hostesses had the further problem of producing some suitable woman. Plenty were willing, but Bart was difficult, moody. After one or two awkward affairs, the word got around, and few wives pressed their husbands to invite him, however desirable he might be at their table.

Now he did not always call Julia, and if she was on duty, he did not usually bother to try again, just left a message that he had called. Julia did not seem to notice any difference, but he did observe a subtle change in her, exemplified by "will you be down this weekend?" instead of the earlier "can you come down..." His reply was evasive; he was uncertain of his engagements. This was true, but he had to admit to himself that if he had wanted to go, if he had been sure of finding his old Julia, he would have gone. The realisation was another shock.

One visitor he had was Doctor Parsons, chairman of the Discipline Committee. Their report was ready ahead of time, largely because of the surprising, frightening unanimity of the committee.

Parsons placed the report on Bart's desk

with marked reluctance.

"Sit down, Parsons." Bart riffled quickly through the report. "Um. Quick work. I'll read it as soon as I can. For now, give me an outline."

Parsons coughed, crossed his legs, decided against it, and uncrossed them. "Well, let me say first that I don't know that we are the right kind of people to make this kind of decision. We're practically all doctors; this is not our line..."

"D'you imagine that this is mine?" inquired Bart sharply. "I know all that. But you — we — are not just doctors now. We're production engineers, administrators, and a hell of a lot more besides." His tone softened, "Believe me, I know how you feel, no one is better qualified. Go on."

Parsons cleared his throat again. "Well, as you will see, we consider a physical deterrent is the only practicable answer. We thought about solitary confinement, withdrawal of privileges, penal dress, extra work — you'll see all this set out in the report, together with our reasons for rejection. We've also listed the types of offences which we consider would call for this drastic action, and the conditions under which punishment should be administered." For a moment he broke through his reserve, "And that was damnably tricky."

"I can imagine," said Bart, dryly. "Let's hope we don't have to use it too often. How would the system work?"

"We think a Home Harmony Committee," he looked apologetically at the Minister, "yes, it's a shocking name — composed of a

dozen Mums, elected by all the Mums, should act as a sort of jury. Under the chairmanship of the Matron they would decide guilt and the exact punishment. In serious cases – grievous bodily harm or murder..."

"Murder!" That was a new thought.

"We had to allow for it," replied Parsons, with an admonitory sideways shake of his head. "If this sort of crime was due to insanity, then clearly the matter would pass out of our hands. The woman would have to be released for treatment or confinement. Anyway, she would be of little use to us. If sane, then the punishment would have to be particularly severe, and the sentence should be confirmed by, er, higher authority."

"Meaning me?"

"Well, yes, Minister – who else?"

Bart had no ready answer. "D'you think it'll work?"

"Yes, with the sort of person we have in mind. This type cannot be shamed, they are oblivious to reason, and half-measures would be laughed at. And we must protect the rest." Parsons finally crossed his legs and leaned back, "After all, the Navy used the system pretty effectively for more than a couple of hundred years, and they were dealing with really tough men. Much tougher than anyone around these days."

Bart was on the point of reminding Parsons that that was a long while ago, but saw that was little answer – in these circumstances.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Well, thank you, Doctor. I'll go into this carefully. I'll have to consult the Attorney-General. It'll raise some nice legal points, I expect. May need an Act of Parliament or an Order-in-Council — if I accept your recommendations. In the meantime, please regard this matter as confidential."

"Naturally, Minister." Two honest, decent men shook hands. Trapped more than they realised by circumstances.

A keen north-easter swirled down Queen's Gate from the park. Keen enough to make Bart shiver as he passed from car to entrance. The duty detective standing in the outer foyer looked pinched, pale with cold. Bart knew it was no good offering the man a drink. He looked sharply at the policeman in passing.

"A bad night, Officer."

"It is that, sir."

"Keep your watch in the inner hall," ordered Bart. "Better than this, especially if they've got the central heating working."

In the lift he tried to remember when he last spoke to a human being who was not connected with his work in some way. He could not remember, and gave it up.

As Julia had always said, Mrs. H was a "treasure," but — His napkin-covered supper was laid beautifully, everything spotless, the silver shining, but under the covering plate it was still cold meat, ham this time, the potato crisps did not look particularly crisp, and the lettuce was clearly watery, and devoid of dressing.

"Bloody fool!" exclaimed Bart suddenly. The sound of his own voice almost made him jump. Why not a Thermos full of hot soup? He made a mental note. Perhaps he should take up cooking as a hobby? No, he would always be too tired to fool around with dishes and things. He switched on the record player, accepting whatever record was on. It was an oldish record, a little noisy through lack of cleaning.

Bart's casual carelessness in his clothes extended to most material things, although he was quite happy if someone else looked after these matters for him. Julia, who had no great interest in music, had kept his records spotless. Now, thought Bart, quite unfairly, she is so damned keen on her "glorious" parties, she doesn't even ask... The glorious, truly glorious, voice of Joan Sutherland filled the room. It was *'Bel*

raggio lusinghier' from Rossini's Semiramide, quite inappropriate to his mood, yet he felt his throat constrict. He shook his head irritably. Good music, yet not great. He stood listening as that great voice turned, soared effortlessly like a seagull, its wings flashing in the sun...

"Glorious parties!" he said apropos of nothing, and snorted derisively. He switched off the player, and poured a large glass of Fleurie, his favourite Burgundy. Supplies of that could not last forever. He would take Farmer's tip, look after himself a little more, even if it was unfair. Lay in a good stock. A damn good stock. He sat down to his meal, pleased with his decision. Pleasure which rapidly disappeared as he ate his supper. A few mouthfuls of the ham and lettuce – the crisps were soggy – and he changed to cheese and wine.

The phone rang. As he picked it up, he glanced at the clock; ten fifteen.

"Yes?"

"John, it's Mary."

"Hello Mary – are you back?"

She ignored this. There was a long silence.

"Hello?" he said again.

"It's no good, John – can I come round?"

"Why, yes, of course – I'll warn the man on the door..."

Mary had rung off.

Chapter Sixteen

She arrived ten minutes later, cool, collected and unsmiling.

"Are you alone?"

Bart almost laughed. He helped her off with her coat and took her headscarf, a small service she did not appear to notice, or acknowledge, yet her glance darted round the room, missing very little. The half-eaten supper, the bottle of wine, which he had dumped casually on the overmantel, and his overcoat slung carelessly over the back

of the sofa.

He offered, and she accepted a brandy, and they sat down on either side of the electric fire. It was very unc cosy, and both knew it. Mary sipped her drink and gazed intently at the bars of the fire. Bart, who normally sat, more or less, on the back of his neck in an armchair, with his long legs hunched up, feet close to the chair, now sat up, his wineglass balanced uncomfortably on one knee. Tension radiated almost tangibly from Mary.

Mary looked up and caught sight of the practically bare shelves on either side and above the fire.

"What on earth are those for?"

"Those? Oh, the last occupant had them

full of plates – Chinese I think," he laughed nervously.

Mary was not interested. "You must think I'm mad," she said at last. "Completely mad." She went off at a tangent, her tone implying complete indifference, "Who does the cleaning?"

"You remember old Mrs. Humphries in Stanhope Mews days? She comes in most afternoons, leaves my supper, arranges the laundry and any shopping I need. Breakfast I get myself – it's only coffee anyway – and I lunch in the office. Weekends I'm either away on official visits or at Clacton."

"God! What a life!" She looked at him, no longer indifferent. "But what do you do?"

"Nothing," replied Bart simply.

"God!" said Mary again.

"It's not as bad as all that," Bart was defensive. "Work takes up most of my time. I don't suppose I'm here much more than nine hours in twenty-four. I read a little, mostly sleep."

"You used to find time to have dinner with Roger and me without much trouble." There was no hesitation in mentioning her dead husband's name. "I suspect you extend your working hours to fill the gap. You must have masses of friends."

"Acquaintances," amended Bart. "I freely admit it is my own fault. There are any number of clever, talented people about, full of clever, talented chat – God! – how they bore me!" He jumped up, and started pacing up and down the room, hands

locked behind his back. "You sit there, like a stuffed dummy in that singularly unlovely uniform, the dinner jacket. The 'ladies' have 'withdrawn.' I don't suppose the chat is much better with them," he conceded, "but the male 'in' talk, the dirty jokes, the careful handling of a man who may be 'useful,' golf," he slowly shook his head. "Golf! I could write a book on that – and bridge." Bart's voice had risen, "All right! If that is life as they see it – good luck to them! I'm not decrying gracious living – I appreciate good food, a glass of good wine. I may not be so strong on dinner jackets, but I've never been clown enough to offer cocktails before a dinner which included a delicate wine. I don't pop a champagne bottle, and roar with inane laughter as it runs to waste – and I don't serve the stuff in those dreadful half-grapefruit things. Ever watched a man with his brandy? The rolling, the warming, the swirling, every action to depict the man who knows. The

fact that he's smoking will not, of course, affect his palate. The fact that the glass is too big and the wrong shape also does not matter. It's the thing to do. Gracious living! Half of them have no damned idea! I loved dining in a good restaurant — theatres — concerts, but I can't do it any more, not now I'm as well known as a Shell advertisement. I just cannot sit there in lonely state, conscious of the sidelong glance, the discreet whisper. I can't do it!"

"You poor devil! I'd not realised just how lonely you..."

Bart was recovering himself. "Oh, forget it. Sorry I got so worked up. I seldom talk — now — more brandy? Note that you get it in a proper glass." He spoke lightly. There was a calm sureness about him now, as if the outburst had brought him some relief.

She nodded fractionally, and watched intently as he poured another drink. "D'you know why I'm here?"

"I think so," said Bart evenly, in the calm after the storm. "I'm an expert, I recognise the symptoms. You're lonely."

"You could put it like that."

Bart paused perceptibly at that. He did not look at her, but turned away again and picked up a cigarette box. He said, "But you wouldn't put it that way?"

"No," she replied with equal calmness. "No, I wouldn't – and the box is empty."

Bart looked down in surprise at the box. He swung on his heel away from the steady gaze he knew she was giving him. He tried

to keep the same tone in his voice, but his pulse was racing uncomfortably. "There must be some somewhere."

"You think I'm a first-class bitch, don't you?" she accused.

Bart, cigarette-hunting with excessive vigour in the bureau, had his back to her. "No, not really – however hard you try to cast yourself for the part."

Mary stood up. "Never mind those bloody cigarettes! Look at me!" she commanded. He turned and looked. Her eyes were sparkling with anger, and more than anger. "John Bart, you still don't understand!" She drew a deep breath. "You're as cold as ice, weak as rubbish! Yet everybody knows you're the most ruthless bastard – apart from Farmer – since Genghis Khan! You're a damned good surgeon, a brilliant

organiser, yet you can't organise a better supper than that!" she pointed scornfully. "You own, body and soul, all the fertile women in Britain, yet know not a thing about women. What, in God's name, are you?"

She paused, her chest heaving. Bart stood silent, clutching the cigarette box, his gaze fixed on her eyes, hardly aware of her tirade. In anger, he thought, they are identical... Mary took two steps toward him, looked up into his eyes, then quickly down, an action irresistibly evocative of Julia. At that moment she was Julia.

She went on calmly, "What you don't understand, John, is that identical twins are often identical in a lot more than the obvious way. Julia must have told you it was love at first sight. Not that I expect you believed her — you wouldn't. She did love

you at first sight. And so did I."

She dared not look at him. To ease the tension she turned away, and went on in a mildly jeering voice, "You've a rotten memory for some things, just try and remember when that was."

Bart shut his eyes in sheer self-defence. He remembered well enough when they had first met. It was at a wedding reception. Hers.

There were a great many sides to Bart's character, some of which he tried, with varying success, to conceal. Julia said he was inhibited, some said he was shy, others held it was a crashing inferiority complex. He was quite unmoved. For a long time he had supposed his mind was much the same cast as most, but gradually

learnt that this was not so. He was not proud of the fact, nor did he imagine himself unique, or better in any way. But too often had he been conscious of men, men with far better brains than his, who were faintly uneasy in his company, dimly aware that this was a mind of an order quite different from their own. Bart did his best to cover it up, for the herd disturbed is dangerous. Farmer's remark about the sharks getting him was true. He was wary, chary of revealing anything about some facets of his mind. He sought no kindred spirit, but he cried out for someone who might at least understand. Such a person could only be a woman, for they alone have the deeply intuitive quality necessary, and this only when they are in love. Then a woman will give all she has.

Bart was like any small boy who, in a sudden surge of affection or hero-worship

– and with much heavy breathing – digs among the grubby bits of string, the conkers, the fluff-covered sweets and the broken penknife to find his secret, most dear treasure, perhaps a bright coloured stone – only to be laughed at by the unfeeling and unknowing. The humiliation and the bitterness the boy would know. But small boys grow up, and lose their visions in the quest for the gracious way of life, or some other futility...

Julia and he had gone quite a way together, and she penetrated deeper, frequently quite unconsciously, into his character, but Julia was receding fast from him, and the growing loneliness was all the greater. Now here was Mary so incredibly Julia, offering him love which might be real. But was his love of so little moment that it could be as easily transferred as a bank account? Yet Mary was Julia...

"Well? Say something!"

Bart blinked and returned to the immediate situation. "Be fair, Mary. This is not the moment for me to say something clumsy." He softened his words with a smile, but in her ears it had the sound of reproof and there was dejection in the slope of her shoulders as she sat down. "I suppose we'll have to play it your way." She rallied slightly, "Don't tell me there are no cigarettes."

Bart found some, and replenished the box. He poured two brandies, handed her one, and sat down on the sofa, near her.

"That's a bit risky, isn't it?" she observed caustically. "Aren't you afraid I'll do something clumsy?"

"Don't be difficult. If you knew a fraction of the things in my mind you'd be more understanding."

"You're shocked, aren't you – admit it!"

"I'm a lot less shocked than you suppose – at least by the things you expect to shock me. It's much more disturbing to be confronted with one more like Julia than Julia herself – now." He moved over to the attack, "You came here with every intention of staying the night."

"You're probably right. I only know I can't spend the night in that house."

This was patently genuine, and other considerations apart, Bart was not the man to refuse to help. At once he said, "Of course you can stay here."

Mary was back in her hard-boiled mood. "You really are rash," she said in mock wonder. "Where do I sleep – on this?"

Bart's anger flashed. "Stop being so bloody silly!"

Mary was immediately apologetic. "Sorry, John. Truly. I know I shouldn't have let go as I did. Love is not a thing you can order. It happens. It happened to me, there was nothing I could do about it. I had to make the best of the situation, and I did. Roger and I were happy together; we had some simply marvellous times, but I could never forget that this was not it." She crushed out a cigarette, and immediately lit another. "Don't misunderstand; I know as only a woman can know, love is not just supersex in Technicolor on wide, wide Vistavision. It is the most appalling and most wonderful

thing that can happen to a woman. Men, some men, have visions. Some women have love. I'm not making excuses; superficially I feel guilty about Roger, but deep down, there's none." She waved her cigarette impatiently, "Oh, leave it for now. All I know is I can't spend the night in Harley Street."

Bart was more moved than he cared to show. "Yes, well, let us be practical. I can't have looked in the spare room for months," he was brisk, desperately clawing his way off a lee shore, "but if I know anything about Mrs. H it will be all ready."

It was ready. Mary watched from the doorway as Bart satisfied himself that the bed was aired. A sudden thought occurred to him.

"Did Julia know?"

"About my mad passion?" Her tone was bantering, but her eyes belied her words, "Very probably. We never discussed it."

"She knew," said Bart with conviction. "I always thought that fear of you, after the incident outside Harrods, was odd."

"Be careful, John, you're delving into the darker side of the female mind."

"Yes," replied Bart. "I can see that." He edged past Mary, careful not to touch her.

She smiled sardonically, "Is it as bad as that?"

He looked straight at her. "Yes, it's as bad as that. Now: I suppose you didn't bring a

nightgown?"

"No, I didn't think about it."

"You'd better have one of my shirts. Pyjamas would be too big." He pointed. "That's the bathroom, the lavatory is next door. I'll get that shirt."

When he returned, she was in the bathroom. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the roar of the bath taps. "I've left the shirt on the bed. Good night, Mary."

She answered indistinguishably through the thick door. Bart did not bother, her tone was cheerful. He returned to the sitting room, and shut the door. He hesitated, then poured a large brandy. He felt elated in a way that was unusual, and the feeling of virtue at resisting a very real temptation

was pleasant. At its lowest level, he could not complain that this had been yet another dull lonely evening. He gulped his drink. Now he would sleep.

He did sleep heavily, so heavily that the first he knew was a small soft hand had gently undone the cord of his pajama trousers...

He tried; fighting himself and her, but half awake, his resistance was low. "Julia — Mary! Be fair, you can't make me..."

But Mary, who rightly knew nothing of fairness, and even if she had, was far, far beyond caring, could, and did.

Chapter Seventeen

For the next fortnight only two things kept him in anything like a state of equilibrium. Firstly, the pressure of work was unrelenting, and secondly, there was Mary.

From the start she made no bones about her action. She was in love and alone; he was alone and in desperate need of love. It was as simple as that. Left to his own devices he would have vacillated, struggling with his conscience, evaluating and reevaluating every possible angle of the situation. By forcing, Mary had thrust

him irrevocably past the first and largest barrier. Bart, incapable of lechery, could not make love against his own inclinations, and he had made love. That was inescapable. Mary knew too that at first she might be a Julia-substitute. She could accept that; given time, she would come into her own.

Bart, in his innocence, had not known how powerful a woman in love can be. He had often smiled – and winced at Julia's gay, wildly impractical attitude, and Mary had been, so far as he had seen, the same. But in those first weeks she was like a rock.

That first morning it was hardly surprising he overslept. Mary was wide awake, but lay still beside him. She was not going to be absent in sleep or anywhere else when he awoke; he would need careful handling. Meanwhile she watched and waited with

the patience of a mother rather than a wife. She was very weary, and not a little thirsty. Apart from catnaps, flicking into instant watchfulness when he stirred, she had not slept. Meanwhile there was much to think about. Her instincts had been right; this was the man for her. In their lovemaking she had exerted a power she had never exercised before, not that it was in any way calculated or planned. She had taken a boy, an unwilling boy, and by sheer power raised him to a man. And he had not come to her in the full vigour and wonder of manhood, but humbly. For they both knew that for this time, and perhaps never again, she was not just Mary Flavell, but the great, and in some aspects, terrible goddess Aphrodite herself.

Bart, near waking, stretched out a long pale arm and accidentally touched her. The action woke him, and as Mary intended,

the first thing he saw was her solemn face, framed in the long fair hair that hung loosely about her neck. His lips began to form "Julia," but recollection flooded into his eyes, and his mouth shut. For what seemed a very long time they gazed at each other.

"I don't know what to say. If you had just made me make love, perhaps I might say a good deal, but last night was as far removed from sex..."

She had been in no real doubt that he had understood, but all the same she breathed a soft sigh of relief. The immediate, and possibly final, battle was won. She wanted to touch him, yet the world pressed, and she had to think for them both. She smiled, a smile that changed to mock severity.

"John, you cunning devil! I thought you

had two single beds at Stanhope Mews – and here I find you wallowing in a double! I'll bet your secretary knows this better than her own!" It was nonsense, but it took the intensity out of the situation.

"I bought most of the furniture with the flat." He yawned and tried to laugh at the same time, "My secretary!" He caught sight of the time and the laugh vanished. "My God! Look at the time!" He swung out of bed, and almost fell, his trousers were round his ankles. Deeply embarrassed, he turned away to hoist them up, flushing under the amused gaze of Mary. "I'm late! The car will arrive any moment!"

Five minutes later it did. Bart, panic-stricken as junior clerks used to be at the prospect of being late, left, breakfastless. Just this once, Mary did not mind, she had to give him time. The door slammed, and

dressed in his shirt she looked with faint dismay at the disorder. Pyjamas in the bathroom, a wet towel on the sitting-room floor, and half the drawers in his dressing chest open. In some ways the scene warmed her. He was essentially a helpless male, a mere child. The only child she could ever have.

The faint dismay was not for this minor disorder, but the remembrance of Mrs. H this conjured up. She might be old, and judged from Mary's twenty-five years she was very old, but she was still a woman. And a woman cannot manoeuvre another woman with a smile and a quick twist of the conversation.

One reason for his precipitate departure was an early meeting – nine-thirty – with leading gynecologists to consider the feasibility of cutting the Mums' rest periods

from three to two months. In the bald words of the proposal, "If practicable, a theoretical increase of eight and a half percent in production could be achieved. In practice, wastage might be expected to reduce this figure to about six percent."

Bart was against it – one reason why he wanted to take the chair at this meeting. At eleven there was an appointment with Farmer and Education to iron out a demarcation dispute that had assumed serious proportions between their two ministries. At twelve o'clock he had to be back in his Ministry to present certificates of commendation to some zealous members of his MOH Service, and afterwards he had to at least put in an appearance at a sherry party for the honoured ones, plus a number of MOHS senior officers. In between he would have to toil at his endless paper work, and settle

any departmental matters brought to him for decision.

By nine twenty he was at his desk, drinking coffee while he shaved, listening to Miss Parkins reading his brief for the inter-Ministry dispute. Even so, odd personal thoughts intervened, to be instantly repressed. But he could not conceal from himself, despite his haunting guilt, a sense of well-being and increased vitality. Above all, there was the memory of a profound mental experience, amounting to a revelation. No psychologist's views were worth a light if he had not experienced a similar revelation. Jung, now – he knew...

"Shall I read that again?" Miss Parkins eyed him sharply.

"What? Yes, please. I was thinking." He blew sharply on his razor and dropped it

carelessly back in a drawer.

Somehow he got through the morning. The protagonists of a shortened reproduction cycle went away, temporarily thwarted, and Farmer ruled in his favour in the inter-Ministry dispute. Only the presentation was intangibly unpleasant.

The half dozen MOHS women, smart in their best uniforms and highly polished stout brogues, were drawn up in line. Bart made a short speech, and then the presentations. These women had only been doing their duty at his dictates, but he could not avoid the feeling that they enjoyed it. Hunting down other women, to condemn them to a new and dreadful form of servitude, should not, however necessary, be pleasurable.

TV cameras rolled as Bart posed, smiling

mechanically, with the group. None of this would be shown in the Homes. There the MOHS was now hated and feared in a way Europe had not known since the Gestapo. As soon as Bart had realised this, he banned all uniformed personnel inside the camps, apart from the reception areas.

Despite personal feelings, he had to go along with it all. They were a useful force, and outside the camps they were regarded by the ordinary public with that amused tolerance the British reserve for women in uniform. In the National Schools they were particularly valuable, handling all the non-teaching services — catering, laundry, cleaning, health and clerical. There was talk of incorporating the teachers as well, but Bart was not in favour, despite the advantages of semi-military control. Most teachers were men, and there were other problems.

During his lunch half-hour he rang his flat, there was no reply. Which was just as well, for Bart had no clear idea what he was going to say. If Miss Parkins could have seen inside his mind at that moment, she would not have believed that this was the same man, capable of instant hard decision. What she would have made of his personal situation is impossible to imagine. A spinster well over forty, she had her own private fantasies woven around her boss, and they remained private.

There was a Cabinet meeting after lunch. The latest UN resolution calling for a complete ban on PROLOX was shortly discussed without much interest. Farmer said bluntly it was a waste of time, and no one disagreed. Forward Planning and Agriculture had schemes for the reforestation of parts of the Kentish weald,

and large-scale increases in sheep farming in Cumberland and Yorkshire. Housing had a pilot scheme for demolition of "nonviable community centres" — which meant villages. As the population decreased, it was clearly essential to regroup. Six half-empty villages would take far more effort to run than three full ones, and despite the great strides of automation, no waste of manpower could be allowed... Minor road closures were discussed. A final decision to abandon further plans for motorway extensions was taken; tentatively it was agreed to complete existing schemes...

Bart had to hurry to get back for a five o'clock meeting with the Attorney-General on the Home Harmony proposals. By six the main points of difficulty had been ironed out, and the A-G left.

Bart's engagement pad showed he was

now free to concentrate on his paper. That could wait. With some misgivings he rang Julia.

"John darling! Lovely to hear you! I suppose you're up to the eyebrows?"

He said yes, there was a good deal to do. Julia said she knew what it was like. They were madly busy in the Home. She was on the Management Committee and had had a terrible afternoon, making some of these women see reason about the laundry. Then, "Look, John, I know it's a bit sudden, but there's an exchange visit with the North Wales Home — you know the scheme — coming up. I'm due in May, and there's just time for me to get this visit in comfortably before I go static. Would you mind terribly if I went?"

A MOH directive forbade the movement of

any pregnant woman in her last two months.

"No! Of course you must go." Bart tried to analyse his feelings, disappointment – relief? Both?

"Young Prue's going – you know the girl in the next bed, she had lunch with us at Christmas."

Bart tried to remember. He could hardly recall Christmas. He noted there was no mention of their daughter, and did not know if he was pleased or sorry. He tried to sound enthusiastic, "Well, you have a jolly good time, dear. Who knows, I might see you up there."

"That would be simply marvellous!" To Bart's guilty ear, anxious for excuses, Julia

did not sound pleased, but then she was so excited at the prospect of the visit. "It'll be super. That terribly nice old girl, she must be nearly forty-six, Margie – that's what we call her, but her real name's Marleen! Well, really, Marleen! She's such a character; d'you know, the other day..."

There was much more. Even allowing for her very natural desire to talk, Bart had no need for close analysis of his feelings when he rang off. The relief was overwhelming.

At six forty he finished signing letters. It had not been an unduly hard day, but he wanted to go home. He told a surprised Miss Parkins he was off, resisted the temptation to phone, and left.

His heart thumped as he fumbled with his door key. The flat was silent, and standing

listening in the small hall, his spirits sagged. He slammed the front door and again listened, but there was no reaction. Hope sagged to vanishing point as he made the effort, and it was a conscious effort, to open the living room door, and found the room in darkness. He switched on the light and looked wearily around. Then he saw that his supper place was laid, but there was no covered plate, and a second place was laid. Hope flooded back like an electric shock, he felt his arms and legs tingle with it...

Mary was lying half hidden on the sofa. At once he knew she had done this deliberately. He must recognise his need...

She looked up. "Yes, very wicked, I know, but necessary. I won't do it again – ever."

PART TWO

Chapter One

An expanse of undulating white, three glaring orbs moving unsteadily yet rhythmically, a sense of floating, floating. Julia shut her eyes again, but remained conscious of the light. For some minutes she lay still, listening to the beat of her heart. There was a sickly taste in her mouth, and a growing awareness of dull bodily pain.

Slowly her mind began to work, seeking orientation. She lifted her eyelids fractionally. The three lights were still

there, but now they were closer together. Even that effort was exhausting, and once more she shut her eyes: the floating sensation was less, and she was more conscious of her body. She was hot, her legs ached, there was a trickle of sweat between her breasts and the pain in her body made thought difficult.

There was something in her mouth, soft and resilient yet hard. Her mind grappled with the problem, helped by dim memory. A gag? Yes, she thought triumphantly, a gag. A phrase from a textbook drifted with maddening slowness across her mind, "If the tongue is allowed to fall back, the patient may asphyxiate..." That was it; she was a patient. Where? Why? She opened her eyes again, more easily and with purpose. Slowly the three lights merged into one, and the expanse of white became a ceiling. And she remembered.

Her eyes searched the ceiling; yes, there it was. A discoloured patch where drifting snow had got in, two – three? – years ago. In the early days that would have been seen to at once, but not now. The familiar sight quelled the first faint surge of panic. She could relax, she was an old hand and knew this room well. This was the post-labour recovery room. The knowledge reassured her, and her discomforts assumed a lesser importance. She had only to make a noise, and help would be forthcoming, but for now she preferred to remain still, half enjoying her drowsy detachment. She shut her eyes again.

With slow, almost tipsy deliberation, she thought about her latest confinement. How had it gone? She concentrated very hard, how many times had this happened? At first she could not recall, but she was pretty

certain this was May 1978. Regular as clockwork, she thought, with a tinge of pride, regular... Every May, but for how long? 1977, 76, 75... her mind was confused, lost. She started again. Married in '72, Diana was born in '73... funny that she should remember the child's name. Odder still that she could remember her with the greatest clarity. Perhaps not so odd; a real child that, begot by a real man — Julia stopped short, shocked at her own disloyalty to the concept of state motherhood, but the idea crept back. She excused it to herself; those days were so infinitely remote, it had all been so different...

John. Funny that. Diana's puckered face was clear, but all she could conjure up of John was the remembrance of the photograph of him on her desk in her chalet, eternally frozen in three-quarter

face, faintly smiling. It seemed important to her to try and recall him in movement, but she could not do it. It was so long ago. There were tears in her eyes, blurring the image of the ceiling, and no one to wipe them away. Weakness, pure weakness retorted her well-trained mind. Concentrate; how long have you been here? She resumed her solitary dialogue.

So that had been 1973. A lovely summer. She could never squeeze herself into that swimsuit now, not for a couple of years past. In '74 she had her first set, triplets. The same in 1975, and then quads in 1976 and the same again in '77 – and how many this time? The doctors had told her to expect triplets, and the doctors were seldom wrong. That would be three and three – six – and four and four – eight – and if she had had three this time, that would be... fourteen, plus three –

seventeen, and Diana. Never mind Diana, even if she was five years old, and God knows where, never mind. That was eighteen all told. Only two more and she would get her Silver Star, and a Silver Star in five – or was it six – years was not bad going. Usually they were presented by the Minister himself, would John give her hers?

She speculated about that. Surely he would not avoid that, he must be proud of her...

Julia had been distantly aware of sounds coming from the other side of the thin partition separating her from the labour room. Moans, groans and strained breathing were part of everyday Home life, and since it was an experience common to all Mums, regarded by them with sympathetic indifference. To Julia's trained ear, these sounds were not quite so

normal. There was too much shuffling of feet, too much clinking of metal and too much soft plopping as the steriliser was opened and shut. She listened, analysing the sounds.

That's a Cesarean, she thought. Rough. Mentally she ran over the list of women it might be. There was young Prue, that bitch Deborah, Kate, and old Margie. Mums tended to be friends with other women in the same cycle as themselves. Not that that bitch Deborah was anyone's friend. One set of quintts and she thought she was the Queen of the May. Anyway, it couldn't be her; always had hers with no trouble at all. She would.

Young Prue? Might be, hope not. Julia was on the point of giving it up as too difficult and sinking back into the cosy security of her mind when she heard rapid footsteps in

the corridor. She managed to catch a glimpse of the slim figure of Doctor Parsons as he hurried past her into the labour room. That jerked her to full consciousness; if he was wanted, it must be serious. Standing Orders laid down that two doctors plus a staff nurse were to attend each delivery, and Julia knew that they had been in the room for her. That nice Doctor Sanders, a newish woman doctor, and old Lily, the nurse. These days they were rather detached, impersonal, not like the old days, but no one doubted their ability, and if they wanted Parsons – She liked Parsons. Like her, he was one of the originals, and they were getting less. Home life had hardened a lot since the old Matron left for a senior job in the Ministry. She had been a poppet, had a marvellous way, but this one... Mind you, Julia told herself, things were different these days. Really started with that big 'flu epidemic of '74 and the total ban on visitors. For three months

they had been quite cut off, and afterwards, a good many men, who had been regular visitors before, did not come back. And those that did, mostly came less and less often.

Julia could not blame them, not even John, who came so seldom now. As the supply of men grew less, some of the Mums became man-hungry. Really hungry; they'd do anything to get one. Women can't commit rape, but it was not for want of trying.

That, of course, was one of the main reasons why John did not come; it must be a year now...

Quickly Julia's mind reverted. These sex-crazy women were also responsible for a good many of the changes in the Home, and staff. A lot of male doctors just had to

go. Even the provision of a female escort did not save them from embarrassment, even violence. Julia was thankful that it never took her that way; how a woman six months gone could try to inveigle a doctor – Even when it was made a punishable offence to molest a man, it did not stop. Exhibitionism, Lesbianism had grown, creating new strains, jealousies.

No, Julia did not complain at the stricter discipline, and accepted that occasionally there was harsh injustice. No one was perfect, but she did not like the harder attitude of many of the newer staff members. No, discipline was essential, and as a member of the Home Harmony Committee, she was part of the machine. Neither she, nor, as far as she knew, any of her fellow-member Mums enjoyed their power to punish, but there were some things that had to be stopped for the good

of all. That sex-starved girl who broke out of the Home in search of a man during her rest period, for instance. The HHC authorised a dozen lashes, not so much as punishment as to discourage others. Unfortunately, another girl followed the next night before the first had been recovered. She was not so lucky, a bunch of steriles caught her importuning. When they had finished with her they had flung the broken body into the floodlit entrance of the Home. There were no more escapes after that, the MOHS guard was more concerned keeping the odd fanatical sterile out than the Mums in...

The swing doors to the labour room were fastened back, and the nurse came out pushing a trolley. Julia did not need to open her eyes; that was the mobile incubator taking the latest batch to the primary nursery. The nurse, in a hurry, left

the door ajar. Now Julia could hear perfectly.

For a time there was only the scrape of feet and vague, anonymous sounds, then she recognised the voice of the young woman doctor.

"Well, that's that." There was tired finality in her tone.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Couldn't miss Parsons' fluty voice.

Sanders spoke. "Perhaps they'll listen now." He was very angry. "Bloody stupid, criminal idea, this extended ovulation! It might be all right on its own, but to go on with hormone treatment as well – ! Look at this poor old cow. Fifty-one, coming up to 3 – and triplets!"

To Julia the shock was physical. It must be poor Margie, poor gay, feckless Margie!

"We've saved the children," said the woman, "and that, after all, is the main thing."

"Yes! I know the Standing Orders!" Sanders was almost shouting. "But she's dead – all because of our clever trickery! That's two we've lost here, and the last confidential memo listed nine cases in other Homes!"

"Yes, I know," said the woman evenly. "And I know it sounds terribly hardhearted, but it's no good blinding ourselves to the fact that in the process we got eleven batches, thirty-four babies all told, and that's worth having."

"And eleven dead women — how worthwhile would you regard that?"

Someone coughed. Julia thought it was Parsons, never at his best in a row.

"Eleven women dead," agreed the woman calmly, "I just cannot understand you men, especially a trained man like you, you let your emotions well up and pour all over the floor, like a child. So we lose eleven women. Sad? I suppose so..."

"You suppose so!"

"Let me finish. No one imagines these women could be bred from again. Extended ovulation is intended, so far at any rate, to produce one extra batch, and the figures show that the death rate for women in this category is below thirty percent — no, wait! Answer this; what d'you

imagine happens to any of these women when they retire?"

"Well, they go back outside, they get a generous pension and any possible assistance needed to resettle them. I don't say it's perfect, but Bart's lot do all that is humanly possible for them."

"Being a man, I suppose, you just can't see straight. I'm a sterile, psychologically tested and passed fit to work with fertiles, and there's a very high failure rate in that test! So don't get any false ideas about me. I have real sympathy for these poor creatures, not just sloppy sentimentality. So what happens to them outside? They leave here, full of indoctrination, with their pathetic little medals, expecting at least some sort of welcome, and it's for sure they don't get it from the women! And what about the welcome they get from men?"

You take a long, hard, objective look at a Mum after only five years here – and remember, it's going to get worse – try to see them as a man, not a doctor. Prematurely aged, fat, pendulous breasts, hemorrhoids, thick blotchy legs, they're not women any more, just worn out sacks of fat with atrophied minds, full of Bart's mental syrup and memories of a life which outsiders can neither understand, nor want to understand. They're not women any more, even in here. Psychologically they're torn to ribbons, producing children they never feed, never know, and worst of all, never really want to know. The Mum, God help her, is not a mother or a woman. She's breed-stock, and when her breeding days are ended, she's finished! No, that poor devil there has more sympathy from me than you'll ever guess. But for a biological quirk, I might have been in here, breeding. She's better off dead. At least she died doing something vital, and she

was never disillusioned."

When Sanders spoke he was clearly on the defensive. "You can't be right! Parsons, you're a reasonable man."

"I only wish things were not as they are, but I'm very much afraid she's right; there is no future for these poor women. The Ministry now recognises it, there is talk of an experimental Home for retired Mums. I do not, however, agree that they are in any way less than real women, although I regret to see this view growing among some of the staff. They are still women, humans caught up in circumstance."

"Don't take it too much to heart." It was the woman doctor again. "The majority are quite happy, happier in many ways than the steriles outside, and their indoctrination helps..."

The conversation was cut short by the return of the nurse, but Julia had heard enough. More than enough.

Julia had never been a particularly deep-thinking woman; she had always lived for the day. She had accepted the Home life bravely, if not cheerfully, and as time passed, with growing dedication, for three main reasons. She felt she owed it to John to set an example, there was the undoubted need of the nation, and there was no option.

The sanctity of the printed word – still strong – had long ago yielded pride of place to the more powerful visual images of the cinema and TV. All the dictators of the twentieth century, and the admen, knew this, and the techniques of both were utilised to hammer home in the Mums'

minds that "Mums are special." It was pressed with unrelenting efficiency by TV and cinema film shows, news bulletins. Backed up by priority for all the good things – that were good for Mums, that is – and decorations for the particularly prolific, watched over carefully, with the best possible medical attention, it was hardly surprising if even the strongest mind did not accept the basic proposition that Mums were indeed special.

To Julia, and as far as she knew, other Mums, the idea that they were just breeding stock, did not occur. She could not know that those very few who showed restive signs were quickly removed to a small retraining establishment. Such moves did not cause comment, for there was constant movement in the Homes, due to exchange visits, sickness and with the gradual regrouping of the population

beginning, the transfer to other, more conveniently placed Homes for the visiting relatives, if any.

Released to her chalet, Julia tried to do some hard thinking. What she had heard had terrified and shocked her beyond measure. She tried to see the situation objectively. She was a Mum, vital to the nation. Soon she would get the Silver Star, and the day was not so very far off when she might be a National Heroine, honoured by the sovereign in Buckingham Palace... All that could not be a mere nothing, and yet she saw that so much the woman doctor had said could well be true. It was all a matter of how you looked at it. What a puritan might regard as beastly fornication might be seen by others as a charming love affair. And both, in their ways, might be right.

But the staff view could not be right. It was ridiculous to think the Mums were mere breeding sows. John would never countenance such an attitude, if he knew. But still the memory of the woman doctor's words lingered, especially the part about the retired Mums – and what had Parsons said about retirement Homes? And Parsons, he did not agree with the breed-stock attitude, but what he said had obviously impressed Sanders, and unwittingly he had impressed Julia too. Julia was left, fighting hard not to recognise that her view of herself and the other Mums could be wrong, struggling not to recognise that the ground had opened at her feet...

It was June, and the best part of the first month of rest was over. Julia no longer worked as a nurse, for she was on two or three committees, and for a Mum, a person of consequence in Home life. One of her

lesser duties was to welcome and mother some of the pitiful trickle of new Mums, mere fifteen-year-olds, as they came in straight from their National Schools.

Most of them, still children, were scared, despite the special pre-entry indoctrination given them at school. True, they all received a congratulatory telegram on joining from the Prime Minister, and there was the regulation bunch of flowers in their chalets, but all the same, they were frightened. Julia's job was to calm these fears, and see them through those first days. But one who arrived at this time, a bright-eyed, auburn-haired girl, so far from being frightened, seemed quite unable to regard her new life as anything more than a "lark." She was full of mischief and a zest for life. Although she was a frightful headache, Julia liked her. The child's saucy, even disrespectful, attitude to

authority was not rooted in hatred. She was tomboyish, full of the love of life. Looking somewhat wistfully at her young figure, Julia decided that a lot of young men had had a narrow escape when the girl was sent to a Home.

When, on the second day, the girl did not turn up as arranged – Julia was going to take her to the clothing store to be fitted out – Julia sighed and went in search for her. After looking in all the more likely places, including the kitchen – a place the girl had raided in the first six hours – Julia became a little puzzled, then worried. No Mum could get lost, but this one seemed to have done it. Julia went to the Home Controller's office – the term "Matron" had lapsed with the departure of the first one – and knocked.

"Come in."

The Home Controller was a mannish woman of fifty-five or so. Her iron-grey hair was not so much cut as cropped. Her strong face, devoid of makeup apart from a little powder, was not unattractive, and her clear grey eyes were large and well-set. Among the Mums she was known as "Smiler," largely because of her invariably solemn expression. She was a good, just administrator, but lacked the warm humanity of the old Matron. She was, of course, a mother and a doctor. Home wits said her husband died early to get some peace, which was very unfair. The Controller had been a good, if somewhat brisk mother, and her husband would not have lasted as long as he did, without her care. All the same, sitting erect behind her desk, dressed in a grey two-piece costume, which somehow contrived to look, on her, like a uniform, it was easy to see she was a

capable, diligent woman, and without a trace of humour.

"Ah, Mrs. Bart." She put down her pen.
"What can I do for you?"

Julia explained.

"Yes, I know the girl." It sounded more like "gel."

"I have sent her to the gym for punishment."

"Gym – punishment?" Julia could not believe her. It could only mean one thing, and that was impossible.

"Yes." The Controller glanced at her watch. "I think you'd better postpone the rest of her joining routine until tomorrow

morning."

"But I don't understand!" cried Julia.
"What punishment?"

"She was caught smoking cigarettes. Must have brought them in with her. These schools..." The Controller shook her head.

Cigarette smoking, a danger to health, had been banned for Mums for the past four years. There had been a little trouble at first, but with the withdrawal of stocks from the Home shop, only those smuggled in were available, and here the control was tight, and with the reduced flow of visitors had sunk to negligible proportions. Pipes and cigars were permitted, and the inveterate smokers had made the change.

Julia began to believe her ears. "Do you mean this girl is being whipped?" Her tone

was hard, belligerent.

"Yes. I ordered six strokes. That girl could be a troublemaker, and punishment now can save more trouble later." The Controller's tone was equally hard.

"By what right! You can't do it!" Julia was pink with anger.

The Controller's stare was cold and hostile. "Mrs. Bart, in view of your position here and the new situation, I am prepared to explain my action, but do not imagine I can always be called to account by Mothers." She produced a paper from a folder, "You may care to read that."

Julia frowned, and took the paper.

FROM: M.O.H. & R to: All Home

Controllers.

All Commandants, MOHS. copies to:
Adjutant-General's Office.

Cabinet Office.

SUBJECT: home discipline.

date: 18th May 1978. ref: mohar
107/3/lx/78.

In view of the steady increase in petty crime in the Homes, the following measures are approved.

2. Any Home Controller, or, in her absence, her Deputy, may award up to nine lashes at any one time for petty crimes, subject to the Standing Orders regarding medical

fitness. (Section 4, Appendix Charlie refers.) 3. Petty crime may be taken to be any offence likely to be harmful or dangerous to life, or likely to disturb the good order and harmony of the Home, yet does not warrant bringing the offender before the Home Harmony Committee.

4. All punishments are to be carried out in strict accordance with Standing Orders. Details are to be entered in the Home Register, and reported in the usual way, in triplicate on Form 9486 B to M.O.H. & R Section 4 G.

5. Amendments to Home Standing Orders will be promulgated in due course.

Julia stared unbelievably at the paper, especially the almost illegible signature above the "for Minister."

"It can't be, there must be some mistake!"

The Controller reached up and took the order back without asking. "There's no mistake, Mrs. Bart. We Controllers have been pressing for a long time for some measure of power to back up our authority."

"But there's always been the Harmony Committee! That has worked perfectly well!"

"You may think so; from our point of view that is not so. The committees are slow in action, and all too frequently far too lenient. In any case, this does not affect the handling of more serious cases. That remains with the HHC."

Julia fought back. "But this very offence, cigarette smoking, has been up before us! There was a case two or three months ago!"

"Yes. And do you recall the result? The woman was cautioned – and it was the second time she had been caught!"

Julia changed ground. "But this girl, she hasn't even had a second chance!"

"In my judgement, after this sharp lesson, there won't be a second time. A sore back now is better than lung cancer later."

"You know damned well the girl will never get hold of a fraction of the cigarettes she'd need for that!" Julia was trembling with rage. "The poor little soul, I must go

and see how she is!"

"No, Mrs. Bart!" The Controller had risen. "I forbid you to go and see that girl today!"

"If you think you can order me about..."

"I can, and I do." The Controller remained cold and calm. "Don't imagine you have a special, privileged position, and do not imagine that I am incapable of enforcing my authority!" She glanced casually down at the order, lying on the desk, and then back at Julia.

For the first time Julia felt a personal fear. "You wouldn't dare!"

The Controller knew she had the upper hand; some of the hostility went out of her

voice. "I don't think we should be talking like this, Mrs. Bart. You are a prominent and valued member of this community, and you must not force me to action I would certainly dislike very much."

Julia recognised the olive branch, but did not overlook the iron hand that held it.

"It's horrible!" she said at last. "You can punish as you like, and without reference to anyone."

The Controller knew she had won. She sat down, put the order in its folder, as if removing the cause of their dissention. "That's not quite true, Mrs. Bart. As you saw, all cases have to be reported to the Ministry, and I can assure you they will be watching most carefully. You can be sure no ill-disposed person will be allowed to abuse their power."

To Julia the nightmarish quality about it was the sheer reasonableness of it all – given the circumstances of Home life. She did not like the Controller, but equally she knew the woman was honest and conscientious. Yet this girl had been delivered into the hands of three brawny MOHS women, women of a totally different calibre, whose enthusiasm would only be restrained by the presence of a MOHS officer – and how sure could one be of her? – and the duty Home doctor. This, at the order of the honest, conscientious if unimaginative woman before her!

Julia burst into tears and ran from the office. But she did not go near the gym. Somehow she reached her chalet, and lay for a long time on her bed, crying. Crying at first for the girl, and then for herself. She had never felt so frightened and alone. She

thought again, and in detail, of the overheard conversation, and of Parsons reluctant acceptance of much that had been said. She thought of old Margie, now more important and unattainable in death – the one woman she might have confided in... a disconnected vision of the girl, strapped to the bars in the gym, screaming... the MOHS guard, trying not to show her pleasure... Above all, she thought of that order, and the signature on it. That was the final betrayal; that marvellous old poppet, the late Matron, had signed it.

It was then, amid the disordered confusion of her mind, that the idea of escape was born. John must be told, and somehow, somehow, he must save her.

Chapter Two

Fear thrust her mind unwillingly on, she had to decide, and fear made the final decision. She could not go on living this life, knowing that there was no hope, nothing to look forward to, and that even self-deception was denied to her. Gradually she controlled her quaking heart, forcing herself to be practical.

Getting out of the Home was not a major problem. A much more serious difficulty was money. For a long time the Homes had had their own currency. Mums were

not allowed money from outside, inequality of incomes could lead to jealousy. Instead, all received a generous monthly allowance from the Ministry – of Ministry tokens. These were valid in all Homes, but useless outside.

At first Julia thought of asking some of her friends if they had any real money, but the revelation in the recovery room had made her suspicious of practically everyone. There was also the nagging thought that someone had reported the girl for smoking, and as it was Home policy not to risk implanting the institutional idea in young minds, all School new entries were handled only by Mums for the first three or four days. But someone had told, and there was a strong chance that it was a Mum. A month earlier Julia would have scoffed at the idea of informers, but not now.

She remembered John's few things hanging in the cupboard, untouched since his last visit. She felt a wild wave of hope; a pound or two was all she needed. Eagerly she searched his jacket, trousers. Sixpence, found in a ticket pocket raised her hopes, but that was all.

Julia sat and cried, clutching the single coin, hating her husband for his carefulness. And that, plus a threepenny bit in an old hand bag, was all she found. Frantically she searched again, feeling the bottom edge of the coat lining and probing her handbags in the vain hope that perhaps there was a hole. Just a single rotten pound note! Enough to get her on a train away from the Home area. She swore childishly, and cried again.

For a long time she tried to think of how to get money, but in the end she gave it up

and concentrated on any small portable items that she might readily sell. It was risky, but there was no option. She reviewed her jewellery; she had no regrets at the idea of selling anything, including her engagement ring, she was long past such considerations. What worried her was how to make the sale. How could she sell a diamond ring in a place like Clacton, at night? In the end she shelved that problem. She would just have to do what she could.

Clothes were no difficulty. The Home authorities had always encouraged dressmaking and any interest in clothes, and many Mums had enormous wardrobes, limited only by shortage of space. Julia selected a new tweed costume and a light fawn raincoat which would pass muster in practically any situation she could imagine. For the rest, a pair of brogues, a headscarf and her whisp of a

nurse's cap would do.

With these clothes carefully laid out on what had been John's bed – already she thought of the Home in the past tense – she sat and stared at them, clutching her two coins. If only she had a few shillings, it would make all the difference. There was so much she did not know – what, for instance, was the price of a short bus ride? Prices could have changed a lot in five years. Suppose she offered sixpence, and the minimum fare was more? The last thing she wanted was any attention, and that could really get it. And that was another problem, transport outside. Her knowledge of life was limited to what was shown on TV, and from believing everything she saw, she now believed nothing. Were the trains to London still working – just supposing there was a station anyway. Her knowledge of Clacton was confined to two

or three car or coach rides. There was so much to plan.

She had missed lunch, she dared not miss dinner as well. She took a shower, dressed with great care – for no other reason than to boost her teetering morale, and against Home Standing Orders, drank a stiff whiskey, which was only in her chalet because it belonged to her husband. The drink did her good, and the defiance of the rules helped as well.

If Julia needed any extra incentive to overcome her difficulties, she had it when the auburn-haired girl reported to her the next morning.

There was no cheeky air now. Instead of the sparkling gay look, two sharp eyes, haunted by fear, looked out through

redrimmed and puffy eyelids. The girl would not speak, and for some time could only regard Julia with terror. She went through her joining routine like an automaton, and Julia's only consolation was that the girl regarded other Mums they met in the course of the morning with even greater fear. The only real show of feeling came when the girl clutched her hand convulsively when they caught sight of a distant MOHS uniform. That clutch told its own story. They lunched together, both, for their own good reasons, eating little.

Afterwards, Julia took the girl for a short walk along the Home's private beach. She did not try, as she had so often done, to point out the advantages of Home life. For a time they sat in silence, gazing at the sea, and the girl relaxed enough to glance warily at Julia. It encouraged Julia to say they might as well go back to her chalet for

an early cup of tea. But still the girl did not speak.

On the way back, Julia bought a large box of chocolates in the shop. It was a far larger box than the girl could ever have seen at her School. Sweets were not good for children's teeth, and Julia knew sweet rationing was enforced. But even the gift did not break the silence.

In the chalet, Julia had the tact to seat the girl on a stool. The child sat there, very upright, her eyes following every movement Julia made in getting the tea, her fingers played nervously with the red ribbon on the box which she held tightly, but did not attempt to open.

Julia put down the teapot and looked at the girl, frowning slightly. She could not let the

poor child go like this, somehow she had to shake her out of it, leave her with a memory that someone cared. Much would be clear to her, later. She spoke sharply.

"Come on now! You can't go on like this – it'll only get you into more trouble."

The effect was horrible, the girl's eyes widened with fear, she clutched the chocolate box ever tighter, and she began to whimper... the dreadful sound changed slightly, now it was a high pitched whine, exactly like a dog, asking, begging to be let out...

Forgetful of the state of the child's back, Julia clasped her in her arms, and they cried together.

With the girl safely back in her chalet – it

had been dreadful leaving her – Julia felt a deeper, colder fear, settle in her. The girl would recover, life would be bearable, the Controller might be right, and the girl would not get into trouble again, but also she could never be quite the same.

The mere thought that she, Julia, might suffer – indeed, had been vaguely threatened – made her feel sick. She could not long sustain her façade to the other Mums, and in any case some had already remarked that she was not her usual self. She had to go soon, very soon.

She managed to find an old AA Road Book in the small reference library and she was able to look up Clacton without being seen. Map reading had never been a strong point, but she noted the names of one or two streets. Her attempt to memorise the road leading to London failed miserably,

forgotten before she left the library.

But luck was with her in some ways. The punishment of the girl had been the first under the new order, and provided a new topic, which overrode most comment that might have been made about Julia. All the older Mums, feeling as Julia had done about such treatment, were in full agreement with the order. "Some of these youngsters need a lesson" and "You've got to be cruel to be kind" were very overworked phrases. The sheeplike acceptance, the blind faith in "Them" filled Julia with unreasonable dislike and contempt for her fellows. Now hypersensitive to any indoctrination, however faint the trace might be, Julia thought she detected in the general chorus of approval, signs of undercover cheerleaders; that heightened her mistrust.

The other stroke of good fortune was recognising the driver of a medical supplies truck. As a nurse, she had helped to unload some of the more delicate items, and had got to know some drivers slightly. She also knew the routine. Wednesday and Thursday afternoons were the delivery times, and the same driver usually did both. This was Wednesday and she hoped desperately that Curley would do the Thursday run as well. Curley knew her as a nurse; there was no reason why he should suspect she was also a Mum. If she could time it properly, she could just happen to pass as he was about to go. Dressed in her raincoat, and with a nurse's cap, she could easily be one of the staff going off duty. What could be more normal than to cadge a lift off old Curley? The only risk was accidentally meeting one of the staff, but that had to be accepted.

Watching the van drive off, the perfunctory wave from the guard as the van slowed at the gate, decided matters for Julia. With a thumping heart she accepted that tomorrow was the day.

Back in her chalet she made the final preparations. She packed her handbag. In went an unopened bottle of Patou's "Joy," half a dozen bars of chocolate. If the Home News was to be believed, chocolate and scent had practically disappeared from outside, and these might be readily salable. She packed her own cosmetics, a few clean handkerchiefs, her precious ninepence — and a pair of sharp pointed scissors. There would be no repetition of the Harrods incident.

Thursday morning was endless, and Julia, after a sleepless night, was restless and jumpy. A Kitchen Committee meeting,

under the chairmanship of the Controller, was unavoidable.

She forced herself to take part in a futile discussion, the perennial question, why not chips as an alternative to boiled potatoes for all meals? While one Mum, a devotee of chips, as her figure showed, held forth, Julia sat back, and allowed herself to think of other matters. She glanced up from the table, and saw the Controller's thoughtful gaze resting on her. Julia flushed, and forced a smile.

Afterwards, the Controller came up to her.

"You're looking a little tired, Mrs. Bart." Her attitude was formal, but not unfriendly.

"I didn't sleep very well last night," admitted Julia, "it was so hot."

"Yes, it was." The Controller's eyes probed, and Julia could feel panic rising in her.

"Still, I'm thankful that with my cycle, I'm not six months gone in the summer." Julia was acting for her life. "Must be absolutely ghastly."

"Yes." The single, flat word killed the conversation, such as it was, stone dead.

"Well, I must be getting on!" Julia strove to infuse some enthusiasm into her voice, "There's masses to do. Masses."

"Yes," said the Controller, "but don't overdo it."

Julia left, fear and suspicion clawing at her mind.

Chapter Three

The actual escape could not have gone much more easily. For the last ten minutes of the unloading, Julia watched apprehensively, her hands clenched in the pockets of her raincoat as she walked slowly up and down, ostensibly admiring a flowerbed, fighting the urge to run, and praying she would not get involved in conversation.

Then Curley went around the front of the van to get his delivery notes, moving with slow deliberation, as befitted his sixty-odd

years. For obvious reasons, younger men had long been replaced. His move was her signal. She walked as slowly as her nerves would permit, across the grass, biting back the panic that threatened to paralyse her, to the shelter of a narrow space between two huts.

Once screened, she took her handbag, temporarily suspended by a belt around her waist under the raincoat, produced her nurse's cap, and with shaking fingers, pinned it on.

This was the moment. Until now, she might have been aimlessly wandering, but the cap denoted purpose, and so close to the Home entrance, there could only be one purpose. She was committed.

As Curley emerged from the stores hut,

large single spots of rain fell. He paused, looked up in surprise, the rain rapidly grew into a heavy shower. As he moved, so did Julia. With her head down, she ran the few steps toward him, and bumped against him.

"Curley!" Her throat hurt, speech was almost beyond her.

"Hallo, miss! You're quite a stranger."

"Yes – Curley, can you give me a lift? Don't want to get my hairdo ruined." Lovely, lovely rain.

"Course. Hop in."

Julia was up and in the cab in a flash. Her coat caught in the door; it was a heart-stopping moment, and she only just

resisted the panicky urge to tear at it. She forced herself to open the door slowly, and pulled the coat in.

Curley plodded with nerve-tearing slowness around the front of the van. Once in, he carefully mopped his bald head. Then he got his pipe out, and with unalterable slowness, lit it.

"Sharp shower," he observed.

Julia could not answer. She nodded as she peered through the streaming windscreen at the guard, now sheltering in the doorway of the guardroom. If only the rain would last just a little longer!

After what seemed a very long time, Curley started the engine, and the van ground slowly in low gear to the entrance.

Opposite the guard, Curley stopped the van. For Julia life stood still.

"That slow enough for you, matey?"

Hunched against the far door, Julia could neither see nor hear what the guard said, and she was past all care, she could only sit, her head averted.

Curley grunted in reply to the inaudible guard, and then they were rolling. As the van began to move, Julia shut her eyes.

"Bossy bitch — if you'll pardon the expression, miss. She reported me for exceeding five miles an hour in the camp." He muttered something to himself, then, "Where can I drop you?"

Julia fought back the tears. This was no

time to give way. She remembered one of the names she had noted, just for this situation. The knowledge of her forethought did something to raise her spirits, "Oh – d'you know Old Road?"

"That's the one running up past that convalescent home?"

"Yes, that's it." She hoped.

"Go out that way, miss – which end?"

"Oh, the far end."

Curley nodded. At that moment Julia loved him. Elderly, but reliable. His van wouldn't break down – a fear that had haunted her from the moment they left the stores hut. She hesitated, she needed help so badly, why not make a clean breast of the whole

thing to him? But the shock of Parsons' views was still strong. If Curley was willing, she might get a lift well clear of Clacton – but if not? She decided against it.

While he was busy negotiating a roundabout, she quickly took off her nurse's cap and stuffed it in her pocket. The rain was lighter now, and she allowed herself to accept the overwhelming fact that she had got out of the Home. She could not regard herself out of immediate danger until she was clear of Clacton, or for that matter, Colchester.

No one was likely to notice her absence from supper. The meal was served between six thirty and eight thirty, people were coming and going all the time between those hours. Breakfast was no haazrd, either. Julia only had coffee, and that she invariably made for herself in her

chalet. The alarm would be raised when she failed to appear for a Home Harmony meeting at nine thirty. That gave her fifteen hours to get clear.

The AA Road Book had shown that London was sixty-nine miles away. With luck she'd be there before she was even missed. If she got some money, she should make it. If not she would thumb a lift anywhere, so long as it was beyond Colchester. Money was the next problem.

"This do you, miss?" Curley pulled into the curb, and stopped.

"Yes, yes — fine! Thank you so much, Curley, you're an angel."

Curley never knew just how sincere she was.

"Think nothing of it, miss. Pleasure's mine."

Julia stood and waved as the van moved off, leaving her with an added sense of loneliness. For the first time in years she had been alone with a man outside the Home environment. He had been kind, and very polite. For a fleeting second Julia thought of this old man. She would dearly have loved to give him an ounce of the disgusting shag he smoked.

The rain had stopped now. Julia stood, undecided. The street was very quiet, all the shops were shut. She wished she had asked Curley where he was going, might have given her an idea about direction. She was fairly certain his depot was not in Clacton, in which case he must surely be going toward Colchester. She turned in the

direction he had gone – and saw two figures in the graygreen of the MOHS.

Immediately she turned and walked as slowly as her nerves would allow, back down Old Road. At a road junction she spotted a public convenience, and made for it.

There was no attendant, and Julia let herself into a WC. She stood there, behind the door, her legs trembling uncontrollably, for nearly ten long minutes. Nothing happened, and common sense asserted itself. If the MOHS women had spotted her, they would not have hung around.

She pulled herself together, put on the headscarf, arranging it to conceal as much of her face as possible, and unbolted the door. A car roared past, then silence. She

walked over to the washbasins, and looked anxiously at herself in the mirror.

For a brief second fear gripped her anew at the sound of footsteps, but it was the sloppy clacking of sandals on the tiled floor; no MOHS woman wore anything but brogues.

A girl, eighteen or nineteen, came in. She hardly glanced at Julia before disappearing into a WC. Julia's mind raced; the brief glance in the mirror was not much, but enough. This couldn't be a guard, no guard slouched like that. A shop girl or an early holidaymaker.

Julia's heart thumped. She had to make a start somewhere. She took out her lipstick and compact and slowly, very slowly, began to apply lipstick.

Eventually the girl came out. Julia's prayer was answered; she came over to the washbasins.

"Sorry," said Julia as off-handedly as she could. "I seem to have the only piece of soap."

"Thanks," said the girl, and lapsed into stony silence.

Julia, unnecessarily powdering her face, went on, "I suppose they just forget. Not that I'm able to criticise – I've left my purse in a shop somewhere, can't remember which, and now they're all shut."

"Oh yes." The girl was massively uninterested.

"Yes," said Julia, trying desperately to strike the right note. "And now – I just don't know how I'm going to get home!" God, how true that was!

"Awful," agreed the girl absently, now drying her hands.

"The silly thing is, the only thing I've bought is a bottle of scent – and that won't be much good for my husband's supper."

"You're married then?" For the first time, the girl showed a flicker of interest.

"Yes." It seemed an odd question, and immediately Julia's guard was up. "Why?"

"Dunno. Jest wondered. Still, I suppose you're old enough to have been married years an' years." The way she said it, it was indeed a very long time ago. It also

seemed to answer her own question. She was about to leave.

"Look," said Julia quickly and untruthfully, "you're a smart good-looking girl who could use it – suppose I sell you the scent, very cheaply. Then I'll get home, and you'll get a real snip." She took the bottle out of her bag, and stood it, in all its glittering glory, on the dirty shelf, against a background of spotty mirror and a venereal disease poster.

"Coo," said the girl, looking closely, "Patu. Is that a good one?"

Julia assured her it was, pointed out that the seal was unbroken, and continued, "It used to be advertised as the most expensive perfume in the world." She let that sink in, then added. "Real French perfume."

"Coo!" said the girl again. "Howja get it?"

Julia tried a cunning smile. "Never you mind. You youngsters don't know everything, you know."

"How much was it?"

For sure the girl was hooked. Julia guessed wildly, "Six guineas."

"Six! For a little bottle like that! I kin get a big, big bottle of 'Heavenly Bliss' for seventeen and six!"

"Maybe, but it's not like this stuff." She laid it on thick. "You're a sophisticated type. This is a rare, sophisticated perfume. Just suit you. Tell you what. You can have it for three pounds." The smile was now

designed to be knowing, enticing. "Your young man will go mad!"

"My young man! That's a laugh!" The girl looked at her a little contemptuously, "You don't have much idea, do you? Still, at your age, an' married an' all that... anyway, I ain't got three quid."

Julia kept the smile going somehow, but just then she could have killed the girl – for several reasons. Some of Julia's hard-won assurance left her, desperation asserted itself. "How much have you got?"

The girl fumbled in her handbag. At last she answered. "Seventeen bob, an' I can't afford all that. I've got to git back – give yer twelve."

Julia felt sick. She couldn't go through all

that again, and the next one might not be as safe as this dreary, stupid little bitch.

"That's giving it away!"

The girl fingered the fine gilt top of the flask. She sighed. "Well, I'll make it fifteen bob, an' a packet of fags. That'll only leave me two bob for me fare. Can't even git me Real-Life Love mag."

It had the ring of truth. At least it would get her beyond Colchester.

"All right." Julia held out her hand, trying to keep it from shaking. Slowly the girl counted the money out, and handed over the cigarettes, which Julia had forgotten.

"Well, I must be off." Julia shut her bag, and moved to the entrance. The girl, too,

was nearly forgotten.

"Ere!"

If she wanted her money back...

"Yes?"

The girl was hesitant. "What did you say I was, sof y somethink?"

"Oh – sophisticated. Smart, with-it."

"Coo!"

Outside there was no sign of the MOHS, and not many other people, either. Julia walked briskly, her head slightly down whenever anyone passed her. This must be the road out of the place, it must be.

A quarter of a mile up Old Road, this problem was settled by a road sign. The left-hand fork was for Colchester – and London.

Julia slowed down slightly in the London Road. The compulsion to keep moving was very strong, yet she knew this was no answer. Thumbing a lift was too dangerous here, too many Home staff must live around this area. Again, the answer presented itself. Ahead was a bus stop, and a small knot of people indicated that one should be along soon. She joined the ragged queue, and when another woman came and stood behind her, she felt able to relax slightly. There was no one in the queue she knew, and she was reasonably well screened from passersby.

There was no immediate pressure, and she was able to take stock. It was a pleasant

evening, the sun was still warm, but Julia felt chill. She was soaked with sweat, and the light breeze made her shiver. Seawards, clouds were beginning to bank up, not a good augury for the night to come, but Julia was not disposed to think beyond her next step, getting to the relative safety of Colchester.

Ten minutes later the bus arrived. The destination board showed that Colchester was the terminus.

It was a tense moment, getting aboard. There might have been someone from the Home on it already, but there was not. With her head well down, Julia made her way up to a front seat. That way, no one would have to pass her as they got off, and there was no chance of being recognised. Still shivering slightly, she sat back and tried to concentrate on her next move. Her

thoughts were interrupted by the conductor, an old man, even older than Curley. The fare to Colchester was nine shillings. She was horrified, it was much more than she had expected. That left six and ninepence, and there would be over fifty miles still to go. Silently she cursed the impecunious girl back in Clacton.

It was after seven o'clock when she got off in Colchester. She had already decided that she would not risk hanging around the town centre, her one attempt at trade had not filled her with confidence, and she had no idea how she could set about selling her engagement ring, especially at that time of day. She got her bearings from the road signs, and set off on the road to London. It would have to be a lift.

The road seemed endless, there were few cars and practically no lorries. Back in the

bus she had decided that cars were too dangerous, it had to be a lorry. She trudged on. Ahead she could see that there was some sort of major road junction, and that raised her hopes.

And then it began to rain; at first lightly, pleasantly, laying the dust. But soon it was a steady downpour, and Julia sheltered momentarily under a tree, and realised just how tired she was. She did not know it, but she had walked three miles from the middle of Colchester. But she did know that her feet hurt and that she was badly out of practice. Heavy accumulated splashes from the tree drove her on, the rain behind her, beat against her legs. As she reached the junction she saw, a little farther on, and on the same side, a huddle of huts, dominated by a large, brightly lit sign. "Bert's Drive-Inn,"

Chapter Four

Seen in the advancing dusk, through the heavy rain, the pink neon-lit windows were very attractive to Julia. Reaction had set in; she was tired, very thirsty, even a little hungry. Six and ninepence would not get her very far toward London. A further attraction was a row of lorries parked on the uneven gravel at the side.

A large blackboard trestle sign bore the words "Fish 'n Chips 5/-." That was enough for Julia.

Bert's was a riot of sound. The radio fought a fluctuating battle with the clatter of plates, shouted witticisms and laughter. Steam curled slowly from the kitchen hatch, to mix with cigarette smoke in the café, and the strong, long-standing smell proclaimed that fish and chips was an old favourite. Apart from a large, red-faced and perspiring blonde behind the high counter, there were no women.

She walked hesitantly up to the counter. One or two men glanced curiously at her, but that was all. Manners in a lorry drivers' café are not those of the West End. They are a lot better.

"Yes, ducks?" The blonde, mopping the bright yellow plastic counter, gave her a quick appraising stare.

"May I have some fish and chips, and a

cup of tea, please?" She tried to sound matter of fact, but the strain was telling, and her voice quavered. If the woman had said a single kind word at that moment, Julia would have burst into tears.

"Yes, dear. You sit down over there," she nodded her impossibly golden head at an empty table. "I'll bring it over." She turned and shouted something incomprehensible into the steamy hell behind her.

Julia sat quite still in her chair, her coat still tightly buttoned, although she was no longer feeling cold.

The blonde arrived with the fish and chips, a large cup of tea, and an even larger plate of bread and butter. Julia stared at the latter in alarm.

"Oh no. I can't aff – that is, I don't want anything extra."

The blonde, towering above her, gave Julia an indefinable look, compounded of compassion, contempt and something else. "S'all right, dear. It's all in. Fish and chips, bread and butter, cup a tea – five bob."

"Yes." Julia reached for her bag.

"No rush," said the blonde, picking up her tray. "You might want some more tea. That's ninepence a cup," she added with elaborate carelessness.

Julia ate the lot, and felt much better. The future, while in no way rosy, did not look quite so bleak, so insupportable. She decided she would spend another ninepence on tea. That would only leave a

shilling, but this could be the place to get a lift.

She took her cup up to the counter, and feeling stronger, made no secret of her financial state. "I can just about afford a second cup," she smiled at the blonde, who did not smile back, as she silently poured the tea from a large brown enamelled teapot. She pushed the cup across the counter, and spoke flatly, and without emotion, her eyes anywhere but on Julia.

"I don't know your game, and I don't want to." She picked up her dishcloth and mechanically started mopping the counter. "But you're after a hitch – lift. Right?"

Julia eyed the motherly pneumatic breasts, and chanced it. "Yes, I need a lift." She put five and ninepence on the counter.

"Have the tea on me," commanded the blonde, leaving ninepence. "Up the Smoke?"

"Sorry, I don't-"

"London," said the blonde, patiently.

"Yes." Julia felt out of her depth, but was only too glad to be taken in hand by this half-friendly, half-hostile woman.

"Right. You go and sit down again. A bloke I know'll be in soon. Wouldn't trust some of these buggers." She cast a sardonic look at her customers. "Have yer knickers off in the first lay-by. Course, it's different these days, but I don't think that's your game."

After the Home, Julia was shockproof. All the same she was surprised; she had not thought of that possibility.

"Good God, no!" Her fervency was rooted in considerations the blonde could not know.

"Ah," said the blonde, nodding her head.

At first Julia was content to relax; like it or not, she was in the hands of the woman behind the counter, but time passed. At nine thirty she began to get edgy. The tea was cold, but Julia still, automatically, took small sips. Each time the door opened she looked up, watching the man as he ordered his food, watching for a sign from the blonde.

By a quarter to ten she was really jumpy,

suspensions began to take shape. Had the woman got a message to the police? She had not left the café but what she shouted through the kitchen hatch could be anything.

The blonde came over with another cup of tea. "Relax, ducks. You're beginning to scare the customers. Don't fret, I'm not stringing you along. Eddie's late, but he'll be in, all right." She picked up the cold cup, and nodded. "The lav's over there."

Julia was conscious of a feeling of warmth and guilt: this woman was genuine. She might tell the police, but her fierce pride would not allow her to volunteer a deliberate lie. Julia wanted to make amends. She glanced round, then: "You've been so kind. I haven't much, but – would you like a bar of chocolate, real chocolate?"

The blonde, who had bent forward to catch Julia's whisper, straightened up in blank astonishment.

"Did you say chocolate?" Her tone was not belligerent, just unbelieving.

Julia nodded, her eyes fixed anxiously on the woman.

The statuesque woman bent forward again, revealing a terrifying expanse of bosom, and some none-too-clean pink shoulder straps. "S'all right, duckie. I know you meant well. But just take a gander at those shelves behind the counter. Enough chocolate to build a bloody garidge. Anyway," she patted an ample buttock, "if I get any bigger, I'll bust me bleeding roll-ons. Thanks, all the same, ducks." She

mechanically flicked her cloth across the table, and left.

Julia felt small, and very angry with herself, the Home – and her husband. To be duped by all that rubbish about "for Mums only,"

the wickedly cynical attitude of those that exploited, and John, for allowing it. Mums weren't special; Mums were mugs. Bitter anger overlaid fear, and she did not notice the newcomer until he approached her table, teacup in hand.

He sat down opposite her. "Mind if I smoke, missus?"

"No, no – of course not."

He was short, dark with a ruddy complexion and bright, lively eyes. The

worn leather jacket fitted tightly across broad shoulders, and a blue shirt collar, the long points falling over the jacket, was smartly set off by a bright red nylon cravat, the stylish successor to the tie.

He stirred his tea for a while, openly looking at her. He came to a decision, stubbed his cigarette out. "Meg says you want to get to London."

Julia nodded.

"I suppose you know it's dead against regulations?"

Julia didn't, and the hopeless look returned to her eyes.

"Not that I'm saying no, mind, but I've got to be careful. Lots of blokes here wouldn't

do it for all the tea in China. If you've got twenty-thousand quids worth of fags, you watch your step." He leaned forward. "D'you mind showing me your hands?"

Julia guessed why, and immediately laid her hands on the table, then turned them palms uppermost.

"OK, thanks." He must have noticed the engagement ring. "Well, you ain't fresh out of the local gaol." Meg arrived with the inevitable fish and chips, and exchanged a quick look with the man. "Thanks, Meg, me old darlin'. OK; I've got a spare seat."

Meg said, "Don't be all night scoffing that lot. You be out of here before eleven." It was just twenty past ten. She looked down at Julia. "Don't worry, ducks. Eddie'll see you through OK. Good luck."

Julia watched her go back to her counter with regret and anxiety. "What did she mean?"

"Oh, that!" Eddie laughed. "The coppers call in for a quick char and a look round, Meg knows the drill. Don't let it get you down, we'll be away before that."

By a quarter to eleven they were on the road, and Julia was curled up on the bench seat, trying hard to sleep. Eddie had a load of fruit and flowers for Covent Garden, and was due there about three in the morning.

After a while Julia gave up her attempt to sleep. She was nearly out on her feet, but nervous tension and the movement of the lorry defeated her. She sat up, and peered into the darkness, cut by the powerful headlights. Insects, moths, appeared fractionally in the beams, only to vanish as

quickly.

Eddie, hunched forward, forearms resting on the wheel, drove easily, his face lit intermittently as he drew on his cigarette.

"It's very good of you – you can't know what this means to me."

"Aw, forget it! Anyway, I like a bit of company. Lonely game, this."

Julia took out her cigarettes. "I can't give you money. I've only got a shilling, and I'll need that, but I'd like you to take these."

Eddie glanced quickly in her direction. "Straight up – you that skint?"

"Yes. It's too long, too difficult to explain. I know you saw my engagement ring..."

"That's OK, missus. Skip it. I'll buy the fags..."

"No!" Julia was adamant.

"OK," said Eddie with easy grace, "thanks – I'll stand you a tea instead."

Julia wanted to talk. "Are you married?"

Again that hesitation. "No."

Julia pressed. "Why not?"

He gave a short, mirthless laugh. "It's a bit old-fashioned these days."

"Oh, I don't know – I'm married."

Eddie tossed his cigarette out of the window. "Yes, but you're a bit older than me; things were different then."

It was like a smack in the face. Good God, she was only twenty-eight! She summoned up her courage, "How old are you?"

"Coming up to thirty."

Julia leaned back; she had nothing to say. Unconscious of the blow he had struck, Eddie went on, "Look at it from the man's angle – why bother to get hitched? For a start, a lot of birds are real funny these days. They're keen enough like, but they only want one thing, the bloke doesn't matter. You feel like they hate the sight of you, they just use you – and they can be right savage, too. Know what I mean?"

Julia did. Her memory flashed back to the face of the woman outside Harrods.

"Course," resumed Eddie, "they're not all like that, but there's quite enough of 'em, and a bloke would be daft to marry one. But even with others, you can't have a real home. We're all equal now, equal pay and all that, and everybody's working. No real home life, none of the old slippers in front of the fire like me dad had, and anyway, even with the best, there's something – I can't explain exactly."

He lapsed into silence, thinking. "Take old Meg. Real nice bird, even if she does take a bit of knowing. We got shackled up, lived together a few months, but somehow," he shrugged, "we just drifted. No real rows like, still good pals and all that, but there's nothing in it, nor in any other birds I've met. Perhaps I've been unlucky. It's just a cheap

thrill, and when that's over you just drift."

"What happens when you get older?"

"Dunno," said Eddie simply.

The awful desolation got through to Julia, despite her own troubles. "You'll find a nice girl one of these days." The irony of it, she was doing the comforting!

"Perhaps," said Eddie doubtfully, "but I can't see it. All this stuff the Government churns out about building a New Britain – well, I suppose they're right. But one thing's for certain; the new lot are going to be different, living in a different world, just as our mums and dads were different. But us! We're just the poor bastards in between – pardon the expression – like a bit of rotten meat in a sandwich. For us it's work, and

'do as you like, Mum's drunk,' and that's our lot."

Julia was horrified, she had never thought much about life outside. It was too much for her just then. Womanlike, she changed to practical matters. "How do you get on for darning – laundry – that sort of thing?"

"If I'm hooked up with a bird, you both sort of muck in. If not, well, the old drip-dry is easy, and if the holes in me socks get too big, I chuck 'em away. I got a room in Ipswich, and the old biddy there takes me laundry round the corner for me. Mostly I eat out." He laughed again, "Sounds fun, don't it? But what else? What's the use of a house and a bit of garden without kids? Even if you've got a steady bird, it's no cop." He pulled out another cigarette. "Why slave your guts out buying a three-bedroom house? Specially with this latest

gag of Farmer's, the Wealth Act."

"What's that?"

He sounded very surprised. "Don't you know about that?"

"I never bother myself with politics."

"Well – it boils down to this; with no kids to leave anything to, what happens when you snuff it? This lot makes it the law that, if you have no dependants – an old mum like – it all goes to the Crown, that's the Government. Take me. If I bought it, I've no dependants. Me brother is OK, got his own business, so he gets nothing, it'd go to the State. Good scheme really, if the legal geezers were allowed to fool around trying to work out who got what, no one would get anything, it would go on forever and we'd be left with a lot of fat lawyers. Makes the

regrouping easier as well."

They were driving through Chelmsford, dark and silent, with little sign of life. Eddie said carelessly, "Hear this dump is on the closing list."

"What – the whole town?" Julia had heard vaguely of the regrouping, but it was a matter of no interest to a dedicated Mum. Now it assumed real proportions.

"Course! No point in closing a bit, except in London or some of the other big dumps. Going to take time. Farmer says it's a twenty-year job. Anyway, Chelmsford's had it."

"What happens, then?"

"I don't rightly know. As you know, all

house building stopped three, four years back. If a town's on the closing list, no big repairs are done, just a bit of patching if they reckon it's worth it. They don't reckon to do anything in the last ten years. No new shops are allowed, or cinemas or anything like that. It just runs down. Reckon they'll just leave this lot. Too big to bulldoze flat, like they've done with one or two small villages. Most people from here'll go to Colchester, that's to be kept going." He dragged on his cigarette. "Right creepy it'll be driving through empty bloody towns. Right creepy."

Julia did not answer, and Eddie thought she had dozed off. He drove on in silence, hunched over the wheel, cigarette drooping.

But Julia was not asleep. In the depths of despair at what lay behind, and what lay

ahead, she was crying silently, the tears coursing unchecked down her face. Crying for herself, the Mums, and her country.

There was a fine drizzle as they rumbled across the cobbles of Covent Garden. With great expertise Eddie threaded his way through the near-jammed side streets.

"For the last twenty years they've planned to rebuild this lot. Well, hard flaming luck, they won't have to bother now." He climbed quickly out of the cab. It was just three o'clock. "Hang on, missus. Won't be a jiffy."

Julia did think of slipping away, but it seemed ungrateful, and she was too tired to think what she would do. Five minutes later he was back. He clambered in, shut the door and lit another cigarette. "I'm free for the next half hour. Before we move,

we'd better talk here. I don't know where you're aiming for, but the buses and tubes don't start until just after five – which d'you want?"

Julia had to think hard. At last she said wearily, "The Underground will do."

"Right, missus. So you've got an hour and a half going spare. It's a bit parky, come and have a drink."

Julia shook her head hopelessly, "I haven't the money! I can't take any more from you..."

"Come on! Don't worry about the lolly – I ain't saving for me old age. And what about me?"

Suddenly Julia tugged at her engagement

ring. She got it off, and thrust it into his hand, "Here, you take this. Maybe you'll find that girl sometime and want to get engaged."

Surprised, he turned the ring over in his hand; the diamond flashed in the dim light of the street lamps. As soon as he realised what it was, he took her hand in a strong grip, and thrust it back on her finger.

"Expect I've got the wrong flaming finger. Never mind. Try to get it into your head I don't want nothing. I do want that drink. So stop mucking about, and come on."

His half rough, half protective manner kept her on her emotional rails. Almost submissively she got out and followed him through the bustle and confusion of the Garden. Dazed and mentally flattened, she took little notice of the shouts and smells,

concentrating only on following the broad leather-covered shoulders. He led her into a public house, which to her faint surprise and greater alarm was not occupied solely by market people. A small group of dinner-jacketed men with their women in short evening dresses stood self-consciously, laughing and talking in unduly loud tones. The women frightened Julia.

Eddie jerked his head toward them. "Showing their judies the seamy side of life! What you going to have?"

Julia could not think. It was so long since she had been anywhere, so long since she had ordered any drink except wine. "I don't know."

In a strange way, the lorry driver seemed to know her trouble. "OK, you leave it to me."

He piloted her to a seat, and was soon back with what looked like two glasses of coffee. He squeezed into the seat beside her. "Go on, drink that."

She sipped the scalding hot drink. It was coffee, and something else.

"Good?" In his way, he was entertaining her on his home ground, and was anxious she should enjoy it, and Julia knew it. She did her best.

"Marvellous!" The effort did, in fact, revive some of her old spirit. "What is it?"

"Regular drink round here. Coffee with a good whack of rum. That'll buck you up. I've got to go soon, but you stay here. It's safe enough, and me old mate behind the bar knows you're with me, and he'll keep

an eye on you. I'll be back in about an hour." He drank the coffee and rum, apparently impervious to its heat, and left.

At once Julia sank back. This was a good moment. She was warm, and felt safe under Eddie's protection. Light-headed with fatigue, her thoughts were a jumble of disconnected visions which included John and the blonde Meg, Diana and the auburn-haired girl, an inconsequential childhood memory... perhaps she dozed, she did not know, but it seemed that Eddie was back quite quickly. It was time to go, he told her gently, and together they went out into the chill crisp air of early morning. Arm in arm, as if they had all the time in the world, they strolled slowly through the squashed oranges, broken boxes and general mess of the Garden as the working day ends.

At a corner Eddie stopped and took her hand. "Right, Ma, this is where we sign off." He pointed down the sloping street, pink with the light of dawn. "Down there and turn right. That's the Strand, about three hundred yards down, on the left side is Charing Cross Station – OK?"

Julia looked up at him. "You called me 'Ma.' " Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Yes, well – a slip, missus."

"You know – don't you?"

Eddie shuffled uneasily, "Well, yes. Meg guessed. I reckoned you weren't solid – thick, that is – and you don't know much about these days like." He took her hand more firmly and pressed a coin into it.

"There's half a dollar – no, don't flaming argue."

Julia took his hand and kissed it.

"Ere!" For the first time he dropped an aitch, and Julia realised just how careful and considerate he had been in his conversation. The strain must have been very great for him. Julia let go of his hand. "Thank you – Eddie. I will always remember you, and if I have any vestige of faith in human nature left, it is because I have known you. There is just one final, small thing you can do for me."

"Name it, missus."

"Honestly – tell me, honestly – how old do you think I am?"

Again Eddie shuffled uneasily, "Oh, I'm not much good at that lark, but I'd say, well – thirty-five."

Julia summoned up a smile. "Thank you, Eddie. Good-bye." She turned and walked unsteadily down the street. Once more the tears streamed down her face. Surely there could be no more!

She knew, for her, Eddie had lied.

Chapter Five

John was woken by the muted hum of the door buzzer. Slowly he struggled to consciousness, and focused on his watch.

"Ten to eight! Who the devil..."

Mary muttered something, but was clearly determined to remain asleep. The buzzer went on with short, insistent bursts.

"Bloody people!" said John savagely, and got out of bed. He disliked dressing gowns, in fact, did not possess one.

Hitching up his pajama trousers, he went to the front door.

"Yes?" He was taken aback by the sight of a woman at the door. "What do you want?"

The woman looked up. For a second or two, John stared, then the colour drained from his face. He looked at Julia, the puffy face, pale with fatigue, the disordered hair, a dreadful parody of the woman now in his bed. He started to stammer, "Ju – Julia!"

Julia, desperately controlling herself, felt no emotion at the sight of him. His tousled hair, lightly streaked with grey, his unshaven face, they meant nothing to her, except as a source of help. Almost timidly, her voice unsteady, she said, "May I come in?"

John drew a deep breath, and stood back. She slipped past, making no attempt to touch or kiss him. The idea did not even occur to her.

Silent and tense, she stood in the middle of the living room, twisting the strap of her handbag, watching his face as he came in. They looked at each other, neither knowing where to begin.

"Darling, who is it?" Mary spoke from the bedroom.

Julia's expression did not alter, but her shoulders seemed to sag, and there was a slight tremor in her lips.

John ran a hand through his hair. "Do sit down, Julia." He spoke politely, as to a stranger.

She sank down in an armchair, making no attempt to undo her coat or remove her headscarf, damp wisps of hair hung down the sides of her face. Her shoes and stockings were dirty, mudsplashed. He took in her condition at a glance, bent down and put on the electric fire.

"Don't talk just yet. I'll get some tea."

"What's going on, am I missing a party, or something?" Mary emerged in the act of tying the cord of her frilly, frivolous robe, warm and flushed from bed, young... Julia did not look up, but Mary only needed the merest glimpse.

"My God!" She spoke slowly, utterly amazed. There was silence for a few seconds, broken by John's departure to the kitchen. Mary was completely off-balance.

There was a silly, almost vacuous expression on her face.

Julia, at that moment, had not the slightest interest. For hours – longer – shock had been piled on shock. The final, fortuitous meeting with a postman outside the Stanhope Mews house had reduced life to more elemental matters. A hot drink, a bed, secure from the MOHS was all she wanted. True, the sound of Mary's voice had shocked her, added to her personal sense of loneliness, but it all came to her through the grey film of fatigue...

Mary recovered enough to take a cigarette from a box and light it. The action seemed to put her in gear; she called John in the kitchen, "If the kettle's on, leave the rest – I'll do it. You go and get some clothes on." She watched as he went into the bedroom, and shut the door behind him. She picked

up the cigarette box, "Cigarette?"

Julia made no answer.

"Don't blame John too much. Come to that, don't blame me too much, either..."

Slowly Julia shook her head, still she did not look up. Her voice was infinitely weary, pleading, "Let it go – let it go. I don't want trouble; I want so little..." Her voice trailed away, and she did not speak for a while. "I don't blame anyone for anything, just let me rest."

The mundane whistle of the kettle intervened, and Mary disappeared into the kitchen. The room was silent, and Julia, staring at the glow of the electric fire, was almost asleep when her sister returned with the tea. Mary took a cup to her. Julia

took the cup with both dirty hands. For the first time she looked at Mary fullfaced, and there was a very faint trace of a bitter smile as she saw Mary's expression, a blend of shock and pity.

"Don't bother to tell me. I know – God! How I know!" She drank the tea with almost animal avidity, the cup clutched in both hands. She held it out for more, and when it was filled, drank that with equal speed. Tea was good. Nice, dependable tea. Didn't let you down. Abruptly she said, "Where's Roger?"

It was Mary's turn to look away. In short, hard sentences she told her sister.

"Poor old Roger!" Julia laughed unsteadily, "No! Not poor old Roger – lucky old Roger! Poor you, poor me, poor everyone, but lucky old Roger, lucky old

Margie!" She gave a high-pitched giggle.

"Cut that out!" Mary was cold, incisive.
"What d'you want?"

Julia turned her red-rimmed eyes upon her sister, and shook her head again. The momentary animation induced by the tea had gone.

John returned, dressed in shirt and trousers. He sought refuge in his professional manner. "No talking now. You want a bath and bed."

"No, no bath, bed." Julia's words were slurred. "First, there's something, something..." she was concentrating hard, "must say it..." Then she remembered, and reached up, took John's hand in a surprisingly strong grip. "Promise you won't

tell anyone – promise?" She tried to shake his hand from side to side, but the effort was too much, "You must promise... "

He helped her to her feet, "One question I must ask, Julia." His voice was soft, "Did you see anyone as you came in?"

Julia called up her last reserves of strength, "No, no one there. I was careful, learnt a lot lately." She stood, swaying very slightly and stared with great intensity at him, "Don't fail me, John. You were all the world to me... Diana... you owe me that much... promise?"

He was inexpressibly moved by her expression and her words. "Don't worry, Julia, you have my word, my promise. Now, sleep." He led her to the spare room. In minutes she was asleep.

Mary, who had helped her remove her coat and dress, returned to the living room, where John sat, staring at nothing.

"I can't believe it," said Mary at last. "She's a middle-aged woman. It's impossible!"

"Not if you've had eighteen children in five years it isn't!" His voice was hard, metallic.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do? Nothing." He did not want to talk. "Yet."

But life had to go on. In silence, John got ready as usual, although he refused breakfast. There was no time, for his

Ministry car was waiting, and he did not feel like eating. At the door he stopped.

"Stay with her; let no one in. No one." It was an order. "I'll try to get back early, but if you have to ring me for any reason, no mention of her, or the fact that there is anyone here."

Mary smiled, "Don't you worry, either, I can cope. She was right, you – we – owe her something, poor dear."

John's attitude softened, "Good girl. You're marvellous, Mary."

With John gone, Mary peeped in to see her sister. The plump face, relaxed in sleep, looked younger. All the same...

Quietly Mary shut the door. For several

minutes she stared at herself in a looking glass. She ran one hand lightly down the line of her cheek.

"Good God," she said at last.

Chapter Six

Sheer pressure of work had sustained Bart in other personal crises, and although it was not as bad as it had been in the early days, there was still more than enough work to force the problem of Julia, and his emotional attitude to her, to the back of his mind.

Everyone had settled down to the long hard slog predicted by Farmer. Bart still worked at least five days a week, but the character of his work had changed. The National Schools gave little trouble, and

Homes, now controlled by the MOHS gave him, personally, little concern. More and more he was involved with Farmer, as his deputy, spending long hours with the Premier grasping, with some repugnance, the intricate shifts, the tricks, the subtle pressures and expediences of the highest office in the land.

But this morning, as for three mornings a week, he began as Minister of Health and Regeneration, Chairman of the National Redundancy Committee.

It had long been obvious that when the population sank to its lowest ebb of some five millions in the late nineteen-nineties, these few would have to be regrouped, a process that could not start too soon, if disruption was to be kept to a minimum.

London, in 1970, had a population of eight and a half million. In the late nineties it would be under eight hundred thousand. Scattered at random over the Metropolis, they could not hope to keep the complex machine running. London would be far too big, and it would be far too big long before then. Britain had grown to accommodate nearly sixty-million people, now it had to be cut back to a viable community of five million, and the job done in not much more than twenty years.

So the Redundancy Committee was born. They in turn charged the Regional Planning Authorities with producing schemes for their areas, and the Committee, which included Agriculture, Trade, Transport, Economic and Forward Planning as well as Bart's Ministry, accepted, modified or rejected these schemes as they thought best. Less

exalted subcommittees considered appeals against the decisions the Committee took, resubmitting the more intractable problems when necessary.

By pre-PROLOX standards, the work went at a vast speed. It had to. In less than three weeks from the original proposal to declare a town redundant, the decision, the appeal and its acceptance or rejection would be dealt with. Farmer's Government had been strengthened by the 1976 elections. The New Britain Party held all its original gains, plus one or two more seats. This was not, admittedly, because of greater enthusiasm for the Party, there just was not the opposition. Farmer made no great promises or proposals before the election. The Party line was "we will do what has to be done," and that was all. Judging by the chaos in certain countries abroad, they were not serving Britain badly. One new

measure he did announce was his intention to hold future elections under a proportional representation system. Parliament itself would in time reduce to something under a hundred members.

So the Redundancy Committee, backed by the election results, worked on, with a peculiarly British compound of dictatorship and democracy, hacking relentlessly at the fabric of the nation, built up over two thousand years.

The South-east Region, for example, was tied to London, and included Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire, Middlesex, parts of Essex, and Hertfordshire. The population in 1970 had been some twenty-two million. The estimated allocation for Zero Year, the lowest point, was one and a quarter million. London, the capital, a centre of industry, trade and communications, would have

half a million. All other towns in the region, except Guildford, Maidstone, Southampton, Dover and Horsham were declared redundant, the rest were condemned to death, the final obsequies not later than 1995. The local opposition was intense, but unavailing, for the stark facts were unanswerable.

The five surviving towns would have average populations of eighty-thousand each. The remaining three hundred thousand would be spread throughout the region in smaller communities of roughly two thousand each, and this involved a particularly hard decision, one that Farmer had to make.

This was that smaller towns could not be saved by downgrading. For instance, Sevenoaks was to die. A unit for seventeen-thousand people could not be

cut down to two thousand. Nearby Westerham would be the local centre instead. Many of the larger houses, scattered round the village, could easily be demolished so as not to impede the local reforestation scheme.

And thus Bart and his colleagues spent that morning, working on the far south-west. Truro was to be the only centre west of Plymouth. Falmouth, St. Austell, Penzance would die. The small village of Flushing, across the water from Falmouth would, however, go on as a small fishing centre. Bart left the meeting, depressed as always by what they had done. But there was little time to think of that, and none to think of Julia. He had another meeting, one that was potentially more worrying than the Redundancy Committee.

In 1965 in the west there had been

discovered a strain of rat which was resistant to the most effective poison, Warfarin. The significance of this had not been lost on Bart's predecessors, and prompt measures had been taken to wipe out the rats, using gas, traps and anything else that could be pitted against the not inconsiderable intelligence of the animals. For a time it looked as if this had contained the threat, but in the seventies several outbreaks of Warfarin-resistant rats occurred in widely spaced centres. Immediately the battle was renewed, and the search for an alternative poison intensified. The meeting was to consider the progress — or lack of it — in this campaign. A large increase in the rat population, combined with hundreds of deserted towns and villages did not bear contemplation. There would inevitably come a time when, vastly increased in numbers, and the resources of the deserted towns exhausted, they would

spread out in search of food...

It was a very worried Bart who went across to Downing Street for a late lunch with the Premier. His hopes had been pinned upon a variation of PROLOX which, under laboratory conditions, showed some signs of effectiveness. A large-scale field trial, which had been going on for nearly a year, had not succeeded. What was worse, no one knew quite why. Bart was too deeply immersed in this problem to even wonder why he had not heard from the Clacton Home.

Farmer was in good form. He took one look at his younger colleague, "You look damn' miserable, John. Cheer up! We've got a steak and kidney pie and a nice bottle of Volnay. Don't want you ruining it with gloom," he rubbed his hands in anticipation, "and a nice bit of Stilton. And

one or two spicy bits which may amuse you."

"You'll find it uphill work amusing me, George."

"You're a miserable devil! The weather's good and my sciatica is giving me a rest, there's no immediate crisis, your Home production figures are first class – even the Archbishop has stopped trying to get me to overrule you about the redundancy of York."

"That might be because I've agreed to licence the manpower to cocoon the Minister," observed Bart acidly.

"Cunning old sod!" cried Farmer, admiringly. "He's singleminded enough to be an R.C.!" He looked at Bart with almost affectionate concern. "Anything in

particular worrying you, John?"

Bart told him about the rats. Farmer grimaced, and poured two large dry sherries. He sniffed loudly, "Um. That's a nasty one." He sniffed again. "Buck up, John. We've licked bigger problems than that, and we'll lick this one."

"We'll damned well have to," replied Bart grimly. "And don't imagine all it needs is organisation. You should study rats sometime."

"OK, John." Farmer refused to be dampened. "Don't go on about it." He put down his empty glass. "Come on, let's get to that pie."

Farmer disliked talking business at meals, and for him, as for Bart, informal meals were all too rare, not to be ruined with shop

talk. Farmer was a hearty eater, who liked to concentrate, and did so now. Bart picked at the pie without enthusiasm. Farmer glared at him over his chin-tucked napkin, "Go on, eat it before your bloody rats get at it!"

Bart did his best, but found his thoughts wandering to the subject of Julia. That wouldn't do. For all his heartiness and push, the Premier was not egocentric. The greater the ego, the less the perception, and Farmer was very perceptive.

"Tell me your funny story, George." It was none too soon. Bart could see the questions forming in Farmer's face.

"Well, they're not exactly funny stories. Don't seem so damned funny with you sitting there like Ajax defying the lightning." He thought for a moment, laughed

reminiscently, "Guess who called this morning!"

Bart gestured impatiently.

"All right, I'll tell you. The Chinese bloody Ambassador!" Farmer was rewarded by the look of surprise on Bart's face. "Shook me, too. No mucking about, either. Straight to the point. They want to send a mission to study our methods – how the Homes run – schools – and all the rest."

"Why us?"

"Simple. We've the most know-how. That's first. Then they don't talk at all to the Yanks – and they'd rather die than ask the Russians."

"They must be damned badly hit,"

observed Bart.

"They are. He made no secret of that, either. It seems they thought that with so much of the population on purely local water supplies, they'd be pretty safe. Someone got round that with fine airborne suspension. They reckon on a drop to fifty-million by their Zero Year."

Bart frowned as he did mental arithmetic. "That's a much higher percentage loss than us."

"Yes. Intelligence has already inferred that Asian women were particularly susceptible."

Bart shook his head. "To think eight hundred million dropping to fifty!"

"Bloody marvellous! Puts an end to the risk of a major war out there for – oh," he waved his knife expansively, "a hundred years – more," he went on, confidentially. "I had the impression even the Chinks are not all that sorry – so long as everyone else is in the same boat – and they are."

"Are you going to agree?"

"Have done. Damn' silly not to. Nice little export order goes with it, and God knows we can use all the foreign exchange we can get! Their pig-farming's badly hit. Agreed to send 'em whatever we can spare in the way of immune breeding sows. Chance to get a bit of goodwill. Told him so." Farmer mopped up his plate with a piece of bread and laughed. "They want all the sows to be pregnant, or 'in-pig,' or whatever the rustic term is. That shows just how bad the situation is out there. Fancy

us, flying pregnant bloody pigs to the Chinks!" He pushed his plate away reluctantly. "Cheese?"

Bart shook his head. "Does that mean famine in China?"

Farmer looked at the cheese. "They've always got famine somewhere out there. I don't think it'll make a hell of a lot of difference, and not for long, anyway. Have to stuff themselves with more rice for a while, and the Lord knows they're used to that." Farmer looked again at the napkin-wrapped Stilton. "You're sure about that cheese?"

"Quite, thank you."

Farmer sighed. "Right, let's get back. Lot to talk about."

As they walked back Bart said, "Was that the funny?"

Farmer glared at him, sat down and began to fill his pipe. "There's one more. Intelligence reports – Class One – that the Yanks are using white semen for their AI programme."

Bart looked puzzled. "Yes?" he said noncommittally.

"You're bloody thick at times, John. Twenty percent of their fertiles are coloured." He gave a short laugh, "That's what I call real integration!"

"Certainly would go a long way to solving the colour question," said Bart, thoughtfully.

"Intelligence think the extremist elements in both camps will raise hell when they find out."

Bart was not listening. "We had so few coloured fertiles, the problem never really came up." He frowned. "Damned if I know what we would have done."

"Never mind now." Farmer was impatient. "There's another report which really will get you going. The Spanish have their first Home on a small island in the Balearics. Formentera. Cleared the population and set up the Home last year. Three days ago the telephone lines to Iviza – only outside link – were cut off shore, and the place raided. Neat job, by all account. Four hundred Spanish Mums scooped up. Intelligence say the attackers chose a nice foggy night for the job, all

Spanish aircraft grounded. Anyway, no one suspected anything for six or seven hours. Got clean away, probably by Hovercraft to a deserted spot on the North African coast – only take two or three hours – then by STOL or VTOL aircraft, away, who knows where?"

"Um. The Sabine women all over again, twentieth century style," replied Bart. "That is a nasty thought. Practically all our Homes are by the sea – of course, it wouldn't be as easy as the Spanish affair – but all the same... the Schools might be targets, too."

"Yes," agreed Farmer, "but much less likely. Only heard this item this morning. Got the Chief of Defence Staff moving at once. Troops are on the way to the more tender spots. Navy'll have Hovercraft patrols off Clacton, Skegness and Bognor

by tonight. Mainly a Service problem, but you'd better cooperate with them about more permanent arrangements. Might be a good idea to arm your MOHS with light automatic weapons..."

It was nearly five o'clock before Bart returned to his office. Miss Parkins had a message; the Senior Commandant, MOHS, would like to see him as soon as possible.

"Tell her I'll see her in ten minutes."

Exactly ten minutes later the commander of his private army was in front of his desk. He pretended to be deep in a document, waving her to a chair with the merest glance. "Do sit down."

She did so, and then Bart looked at her — it

was safe to do so, for his face was now in the shade. "What is this urgent matter?"

"Minister, I'm afraid I've some unpleasant news for you." She paused, but Bart was no help. She went on, her voice an unhappy blend of military precision and personal uncertainty, "It's about Mrs. Bart; she's been rather upset recently by one or two things, including the death of a friend. I am afraid she has run away."

Bart was ready, he frowned, and injected all the disbelief he could into his voice, "Run away?"

"Yes, Minister." She could not be more apologetic, watching anxiously as Bart got up and walked to the window – another planned move – this way he had his back to her. He kept silent for nearly half a minute.

"When did this happen?" He was icy cold.

"We think last night..."

"You think!"

The Senior Commandant wriggled uncomfortably. "It seems the most probable time. Nothing was known until she failed to appear for a meeting this morning."

The fact that Bart did not like his army commander helped him now. He had no compunction in adding to her discomfort. The more he had her on the defence, the less chance there was of her having the time or the inclination to examine his attitude. He turned and stared down at the

woman, his back to the light. "Why was I not told earlier?"

The Commandant was ready for that one. "We – that is the Home – only knew at nine thirty. Fifteen minutes were lost, thinking she might be late, and in a casual search of the more obvious places. A full-scale search was not begun until ten, and immediately this was completed, the Home Controller called this HQ, at eleven." She nodded toward the closed door. "I called your secretary immediately – eleven-five, to be exact."

"You're quite sure she has escaped."

"Yes, sir. We know a new costume is missing and we think a raincoat, also she took her personal things – cosmetics, things like that."

"Have you a description?"

Again the woman was apologetic, "No, I'm afraid not. We think the costume was dark grey, but we have no idea of the raincoat. These women have so many clothes..." She stopped, aware that the phrasing of the last sentence could be bettered. "We wondered if perhaps you..."

"Good God, woman!" Bart spoke with real anger. "D'you imagine I have the faintest idea! Well, what are you doing?"

"Discreet inquiries in the area are being made through the police, and our own local detachments are searching the area. I have given strict orders that the identity of the wo – Mother – is not to be revealed, and a security ban on all visitors has been imposed. Not that there are many, but I thought it best," she stood up, carefully

smoothing her skirt, then chin up, in the approved style, she looked straight at Bart. "Minister, I'm only doing my duty, I hope you realise that – but may I assume that you will let us know if Mrs. Bart..."

Unwillingly, Bart admired her courage. Roughly he cut her short, "Naturally!" He counterattacked. "What else would I do?"

The Commandant was confused, off-balance, but determined. "You will not, then, object if we keep a discreet watch on your flat? It would be less – less painful if we could," she hunted round for a tactful word, "er, meet her before she reached your residence."

Bart dared not object. "Of course – but I do not want platoons of women stamping about outside."

The Commandant flushed. "I can assure you of our discretion. One woman close to your flat, a car parked out of sight, that would be all."

Bart grunted. "Well, I hope so."

"I need hardly remind you, Minister, it is in her own interest as well. Should her identity be discovered by any ill-natured women..." She did not bother to finish the sentence.

"Well, I won't labour the point. Clearly you see the need for care in this matter." Bart was curt, "I look to you to see that your subordinates appreciate that too. I will expect a full report from you on all aspects of this case. You will also, doubtless, be overhauling the whole of our security

system, a matter, I would think, of some urgency." His cold sarcasm did nothing to ease the position of the woman. He turned back to the window. "I would also be grateful if I was kept fully – and promptly – informed of any developments."

The Commandant was practically at attention. "Of course, sir."

Bart did not answer, leaving it to the woman to decide if the interview was over. She hesitated, then left.

As the door shut, Bart flung himself into an armchair. Getting Julia out of the flat was going to be difficult; very difficult.

Chapter Seven

It was a fine, warm evening when he got out of his car in Queen's Gate. It was altogether too fine for Bart's taste, and it would not be dark for another two hours at least. He glanced up and down the broad road, but could not detect the new shadow on his home. Not that he expected to.

He walked slowly up the steps and spoke to the duty detective. "Evening, officer. Anything special?" If the man knew what was going on he would understand.

He did. "Good evening, sir. The MOHS woman is over the road, there's another down the bottom on the corner of Cromwell Road, and they've got a car in the park entrance at the other end, all radio-linked." He tapped his pocket, "They're on one of our spare frequencies. I can link up if wanted. If they want me, they tell Control, and Control tells me to shift..."

"Yes." Bart did not want the details, he was only too certain that the whole thing would work most efficiently. He tried to summon up a smile. "Well, don't forget, the most important thing for you, is to keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

Bart nodded, and walked even more slowly to the lift. He could not imagine what had been going on in his absence, and he

dreaded finding out.

In the event, he found practically nothing had happened. Mary greeted him, tense, and with undisguised relief. She spoke softly in answer to his unspoken question.

"She's slept all day – woke up about three quarters of an hour ago, and had a cup of tea. Now she's in the bath."

"How does she seem?" He too spoke quietly, hating this conspiratorial air, which added to the disloyalty and guilt he already felt.

Mary grimaced and shook her head, and led the way with unnatural stealth past the bathroom door to the living room. John flung his coat and dispatch case down carelessly. He poured two sherries, and

took one to Mary.

"Thank you, John." There was an air of constraint, almost formality between them, and for nearly ten minutes they remained silent. Both had heard Julia return to her room, and her nearness inhibited them further. It was almost a relief when she entered.

Still pink from the bath, she looked immeasurably better than she had done in the morning, but a long sleep and a hot bath could not make up the disparity between the two women. John, tactfully, looked only at Julia.

She was smart enough in her two-piece, but it did not conceal her thick middle-aged body, nor the soft, sagging face muscles. John knew he had to be very careful in his choice of words. He had tried, when other

affairs did not intrude, to crystalise his own feelings toward her but without success. Now, looking at her, he knew there was no emotional link at all, and the realisation shocked him. Was he so frail, so shallow, that her appearance should make that much difference? He was less than fair to himself. There she was, the woman he had loved, yet she roused no deeper emotion than pity and compassion – and how much of that was due to his sense of guilt? Mary was the woman, she was the Julia he had married...

"How do you feel now, Julia? You look..."

Julia shook her head and smiled bitterly, "Don't bother, John. Thank you for trying, but I know how I look." Again she shook her head, dismissing it as a matter of no consequence. "I suppose it's quite the

wrong thing to say, but my chief desire at the moment is to eat."

"Give me ten minutes," said Mary briskly, happy that her sister could be so practical. "All deep-freeze stuff, I'm afraid. Steak, asparagus tips and potatoes. That do?"

"Fine." Julia showed more animation at the mention of food. "And if you have an egg to spare..."

"Of course!" Mary managed to keep surprise out of her voice. She disappeared thankfully into the kitchen as John poured a third glass of sherry. Julia took it, and both remained standing. It was their first drink together in a long time and he was trying to decide if a toast to her was in bad taste. She saved him the trouble.

"Well, John, what are you going to do?"
It was a straight question, devoid of emotion or self-pity.

He looked down at his glass. "I don't expect you to forgive me —"

"No!" She cut in decisively, "none of that. I cannot afford to be upset. I have myself more or less under control, I must stay that way."

John inclined his head, "If you say so..."

Again she cut in, "I know you feel very uncomfortable, guilty and all the rest of it. Believe me, it means nothing to me, nothing." She reconsidered. "Perhaps that's too strong, but compared with the rest — nothing."

She sat down, and he followed suit, noting an incipient varicose vein on her leg. "You've got to realise that I'm far, far beyond such things. I'm fighting for my life! Really, just that! I cannot go back. Either I find a new life outside, or I die."

Her quietly determined manner did more to convince John than any passionate outburst could have done. He did not answer at once; he did not know what to say.

"You realise that life will be very difficult, hard – and possibly dangerous?"

"Don't worry! I've no illusions about that. I'm escaping *from* not to anything. I know I can never be your wife again. I do want to be a human being once more."

"But surely," ventured Bart, "you can see we do the best we can in an impossible situation. Tell me what more we can do, and if it is possible, I'll see it is done."

"You'll never understand! No one who is not a Mum can understand. In this ghastly situation the country has no option, and yet that is the final, hellish part of the whole business. It's all so reasonable, so logical – in theory."

Mary came in with the supper. Neither John nor Mary felt much like it, but Julia silently worked her way through her meal with vulpine voraciousness. She noticed Mary's expression as she mopped her plate with a piece of bread. "Just pray you're never reduced to this. Here I am sitting down to a meal with my husband and his mistress, and all that interests me is the food. Food and freedom; not much

else matters."

Mary compressed her lips, "I think you should tell her, John."

At once the hunted look flooded back into Julia's eyes, she pushed back from the table, "Tell me what?" She glanced quickly around the room, as if expecting an MOHS guard to rush through the door. "Tell me what!"

John tried to soothe her. "Now, don't jump to conclusions. You're quite safe. No one knows you're here," he edged away from Mary's demand. "But you should know that the MOHS have a watch on the place. They expect you will try to reach here."

This was news to Mary also, and effectively sidetracked her. The mere mention of the

MOHS drained the colour from Julia's face, she sat very still, her hands gripping the edge of the table. She repeated her words of the morning, "You must protect me, you owe me that!"

The sight of her fear sickened John, he reached across and took hold of her hand. "Don't worry, don't worry!" He did his best to sound confident, "It's all planned."

Some of the fear ebbed away. "What are you going to do?"

He included Mary in his glance, lowered his voice, "It's not going to be easy, but if you do as you're told, it'll be all right. Now; Mary has a cottage down in Surrey, at Bramley. We often go down there for weekends," he mentally cursed himself for his tactlessness, but Julia was not

interested in such trivia. "Down there you can lie low until I am able to make more permanent arrangements. Quite safe, secluded and plenty of food."

"How are you going to get her out of here?"

"Where's your car, Mary?"

"Parked outside, in the middle of the road." Queen's Gate was broad and centre parking had been going on for many years.

"Right. My plan is this; Julia goes down the stairs at the same time as the CID man and the MOHS woman come up in the lift."

"Why should they do that?" said Mary blankly.

"Because I damned well tell them!" Bart snapped at her. "I'll order the 'tec to get the MOHS guard and bring her up here – want to show them a photo of Julia – or give some description of clothes I've just remembered – leave that to me." He looked at Julia. "You go slowly down the stairs; as soon as we let the guards into the flat – you'll hear me say 'Come in, Officer' and know it's OK to go – Mary'll give you the car keys, you go out, get in the car – better get down at the back – and wait."

"And then?"

"As soon as I've let the guards in, I'll tell them to take a good look at Mary – to prevent any confusion," he hurried past that point, "and then she leaves. I'll keep them busy for two or three minutes, and long before they get back downstairs, you'll be away."

Both women stared at him. Julia spoke. "What are you going to do then?"

John explained. "I can't move without a detective. I seldom go anywhere except in an official car, and there is always a 'tec in it. I'm turned over like a parcel from one to the other. When the car drops me here, I'm the responsibility of the man downstairs. I'll join you later tonight."

Julia looked from one to the other, trying to judge from their expressions the prospects of success. Doubtfully she said, "D'you think we should do it tonight?"

John nodded. "Sooner the better. As soon as it's dark enough. There is very little risk – I think the only part is when you cross to the car and that's very small, but we have

to take a chance on that."

"Remember, John, I'm the one taking the chance. Shall I tell you what they'll do to me if I'm caught?"

John looked away uncomfortably.

Julia's eyes widened with shock. Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper. "My God! You do know!"

"Don't be silly, Julia, you know I'd never..."

"Poor stupid bloody fool!" Julia ignored his protest. "Blind stupid bitch! And I thought you were ignorant, that this was something done without your knowledge!"

Mary was puzzled by this outburst. Julia

took in her sister's expression, and rounded savagely on her. "D'you know? – No, I can see you don't!"

"Julia," began John, made halfhearted by guilt.

"No! Mary ought to know – after all she's one of the family, isn't she?" She was bitterly sarcastic. "It's quite, quite simple. If you run away, you have to be punished – it's for the common good, of course – outside is dangerous for Mums, and the Ministry is very careful to protect Mums, isn't it?"

John remained silent, she would not be stopped now.

"So you have to be punished, if only as a warning to others. They get a bunch of

your own sort, the dimmer, well-indoctrinated cows – like I was – and they have a nice little court, just to make sure you really are guilty, and when that's all settled, off you go to the jolly old gym. No!" She put one hand to her mouth in mock horror. "But I'm forgetting, am I not?"

"Don't go on, Julia, you know it's not like that..."

"Oh, but it is! Tell me when I go wrong. I'd hate to give Mary the wrong idea. I forgot; first they take you to the duty doctor, and he examines you very carefully to see you're fit and then you go off to the gym. There's a doctor to make sure you get the best of attention, and the duty MOHS officer to prevent too much enthusiasm on the part of the MOHS, and then there's a select group of Mums – after all, it is for their benefit, and you must have

eyewitnesses to pass the details to the other Mums. It's all terribly reasonable."

"Do you mean..." began Mary.

Julia took no notice, "And then there's the MOHS guards. Only three or four of them, but all specially selected, very specially selected. Just in case anyone has forgotten what you've done, they read out the court's verdict. Then they strip you to the waist and tie you across the horse, and one of those jolly old specially trained guards lays into you with a whip. A nice, four-foot, regulation pattern job, carefully designed to inflict the maximum pain and the minimum damage! And every two lashes the dear doctor takes a look to see you're quite comfortable!" She was choking with sobs, "And the nice MOHS officer counts each stroke aloud, so that you don't get more than you're entitled to! And when they've

finished, they swab your back and put you in a nice cell to recover – and if you're inclined to be worked up by it all, well – you get a nice shot of tranquilliser, and the next day another medical checkup to make sure you're fit to be returned to the herd! It's all terribly reasonable, everybody is so terribly sorry – well, nearly everyone!"

She pushed the plates away from her and buried her head in her arms on the table.

Mary looked at John. "That's true – isn't it?"

"But it's not like that!" retorted John. "No one likes..."

"Oh, no?" Julia looked up, anger had replaced tears, "You should take a look at the guards' faces – yes, and some of the Mums too! But the guards... d'you imagine

any reasonable woman would volunteer for such work? Nice, reasonable sadistic beasts!" She concentrated on John, almost spitting the words at him, "You re a stupid, innocent fool, John! I was too; even sentenced women to this myself, blinded by your propaganda! I didn't know how low we had sunk, the sheer degradation of it all! Perhaps the staff are right; perhaps we are not much more than cattle!"

John shook his head wearily, "It's not like that and you know it. You admit that until recently you fully agreed with corporal punishment — and it's been used very sparingly, as you well know." He was angry himself, now. "You give me an alternative!"

Julia's anger had spent itself, but the fear remained. "I'm beyond thinking of others, all I can say is I'm terrified of being treated like that, I couldn't bear it." She stared

sadly at him. "Perhaps the worst, last of many straws, is that I'm not sure you would save me from it, even if you could." There was no malice, only infinite sadness in her voice.

"If you think that, there is nothing I can say that will change your mind." The charge shocked him, yet was it so impossible? "Do you know me so little..."

"I knew you once, John, but you are not the man I married... Oh God! It's no use going on," she leaned back, took a deep breath. "I am sure of this; for the sake of what once was — and your tender conscience — you'll do your best to keep me free."

"I promise you that," he said solemnly, and meant it.

They drank a little brandy, and John detailed his plan, making Julia repeat his instructions, trying to infuse her with confidence in him, and his plan.

Mary sat silent, thoughtful.

Half an hour later the plan was translated into action. White and trembling slightly, Julia stood ready in the hall as John phoned down to the CID man. Mary cleared the supper things in silence, and then disappeared into the bedroom to get ready for her part.

There was an electric two or three minutes while they waited, Julia's eyes glancing nervously at the door, half open so that they could hear, and at John's impassive face.

The lift door clanged down below, echoing sepulchrally up the lofty stairwell. John gave Julia an encouraging squeeze on her arm, smiled and pushed her gently out of the door. She made off unsteadily down the carpeted corridor, a lonely figure, hunched with fear. She was well clear, waiting on the half-landing below when the lift arrived.

John swallowed hard, as the lift opened and the guard and the detective stepped out. "Come in, Officer." He spoke loudly – too loudly. His forehead was suddenly damp.

He shut the front door firmly. Mary spoke from the living room. "Do come in. I know Doctor Bart wants you to take a good look at me, and the light's better here."

John marvelled, not for the first time, at her self-possession. The two shuffled in uneasily, and stood by the sofa, trying not to look around the room.

John introduced Mary, explaining that Julia was a twin sister, but added that she now looked rather older. At once the MOHS woman was alert – too alert for John's liking. She was young, smart and petite, quite unlike the usual MOHS type. Her doubts were allayed by the CID man – also aware of her suspicion – he knew Mary by sight, and said so. Then Mary, dressed in a sweater, slacks and short swagger coat, said she was off. A brief smile, an admonition to John not to be late, and she was gone.

John explained, and his awkwardness at telling lies passed as reasonable embarrassment, that he had decided to

spend the night out of town... "It might be better." There was a hardly concealed look of contempt in the MOHS guard's eyes. A man running away, as usual.

He spun out the meeting – offering a drink, and having a heartgripping moment, praying that Mary had remembered to clear the three glasses away. She had. All told, he held them for five minutes, and then they left, the CID man warmer for a large Scotch. John sighed with relief as he shut the door. If he was any judge of Mary's driving, she would be the other end of the Cromwell Road before the guards even left the flat.

He poured himself an even larger Scotch, and phoned the Ministry garage.

Mary, clutching her overnight bag tightly,

walked slowly down the steps and across the road to the car. Traffic was light, but she was relieved to see that the line of parked cars effectively screened her from the dark patch which was the entrance to the park.

She opened the car door, proof that Julia had made it, got in and shut the door, reaching swiftly for the starter. No keys.

"Where are the bloody keys?" she hissed.

A trembling hand crept over the back of her seat.

"For Christ's sake, relax!" She pressed the starter, "You've got nothing to worry about."

All the same, she did not enjoy the agonising delay at the Cromwell Road traffic lights. She spotted a woman loitering on the corner. Judging by her appearance, there was small chance that she would be accosted – not that there was much danger anyway, sterility had practically killed prostitution.

As they crossed yellow-lit Putney Bridge, Mary was finally satisfied that they were not being followed.

"Ok, Julia." Her manner was abrupt, but not unkind, "You can relax now – until we get to Bramley."

She explained that the local police would automatically be told by the Ministry that the Minister was on his way, and would put a guard on the cottage.

"But don't worry about that; we'll drive straight into the garage – the locals know me – and there's a door connecting the garage with the kitchen."

Mary drove with her usual careful ferocity. Julia stayed in the back, silent and huddled in one corner, averting her head whenever the lights of a passing car lit up the interior.

Her sister was silent too, concentrating on the road, for she would have to keep moving to reach the cottage before John. His "great black beast of a car" – as she called it – was faster, and the distinctive group of three blue lights, front and back, when used, made a big difference. Any police car, chasing the speeding Minister, would at once become an escort at a quick on-off flick of the blue lights. She hoped he would have the sense to restrain his driver.

In 1978 the volume of traffic was perceptibly less than in 1972, and they made good time through the Kingston bypass. Although it promised to be a fine weekend, there were not many cars. With no children to take to the sea, there was less incentive. Brighton and a half dozen other resorts had already started removing parking meters.

With Esher behind them, Mary relaxed herself, and lit a cigarette. The black ribbon of road unwound steadily before them.

Cobham, and on through half-demolished Ripley, one of the first villages condemned in Surrey. Mary spoke.

"Have you thought what you want to do?"

For a long time Julia did not answer and Mary was about to repeat her question when she replied.

"I don't really know, there has not been time, but I think I would like to work with children." Perhaps she would meet Diana, she at least was close to her, perhaps...

"I don't think that will be very easy, you know. I'm sure John will do what he can, but you must not expect too much of him."

Julia's voice was hard, "Don't worry, I don't expect much of anyone these days. Expect nothing, trust no one."

"That cuts both ways. Can you be trusted?"

Julia read her sister's thoughts. "You needn't think I will try to get John back. Two days ago, before I broke out, my dearest, unattainable wish was to be his wife once more. Too much has happened since then. I can't regain what was once my life – and I don't even want to. So you needn't worry, either. By all means go on living with him, you won't have any trouble from me; I really couldn't care less."

The underlying tone of bitterness did not convey complete conviction.

"Look," said Mary firmly, "this should have come from John, but there is one point I want you to get straight now. You have not, I suppose, heard of the Matrimonial Causes Act, 1974?"

"What on earth's that?"

"Shorn of all the legal rubbish, it allows any man, married to a National Mother, to get that marriage annulled."

Her voice softened, and she spoke with genuine sincerity.

"I'm sorry, Julia, but John is my husband."

Chapter Eight

Quite unnecessarily, Bart visited his office in order to give his wife a good start. Absently he shuffled a few papers around, then went into the nearby MOHS HQ. In earlier days this had been his operations centre, now his private army had it as a control room. At that hour of night it had a somewhat deserted appearance, staffed only by a duty officer and three or four communications personnel.

The duty officer stiffened at the sight of him, and he waved her not to get up.

"Any further news?"

"No, sir. We think the, er, absentee must now be in the London area."

The euphonious "absentee" made Bart frown. "Why d'you think that?"

"Well, sir — we've combed the Home area pretty thoroughly and our people down there are confident she is not there. It seems reasonable to suppose that she would return to — to London."

The unnatural stillness of the rest of the duty watch told its own story, and it irritated Bart.

"Hm." Bart was curt. "Nothing else?"

"No, sir."

"Hm," said Bart again. "I'm spending the night down at Bramley. Keep me informed. Anything else?"

"MOD Army informed us this evening that all Homes in the East and South-east Regions are covered, and that the erection of anti-Hovercraft posts will start in the morning."

"Good, good." Bart had a sudden inspiration. It would not solve, but at least it would give him time to consider, his personal problems. It would also divert any suspicions that might arise. "I want you to tell MOD I will be visiting these regions over the weekend, starting first thing tomorrow at Skegness and working south to Bognor. Warn the Homes too. Good night."

"Yes, sir." The duty officer scrambled out of her chair as Bart left. "Good night, sir."

Mary and Julia reached the cottage without trouble. Indeed, for Mary, the ominous silence that had greeted her revelation was a fair indication that she had all the trouble she needed in the car with her. She waved perfunctorily at a doleful policeman and drove in when he had opened the garage doors for her.

She led the silent Julia through the kitchen and into the living room. The roughly plastered white walls glowed pinkly in the reflected light from the red quarry-tiled floor.

Julia flopped into a deep armchair, and gazed blankly at the oak-beamed ceiling.

Mary carefully checked the curtains and switched on the fire. She turned on the radio, adjusting the volume to act as a sufficient blanket for conversation – just in case a policeman heard voices, which was unlikely. For a moment she made minute adjustments to the positions of various objects on the high mantelpiece. Still Julia did not speak.

Mary sighed, and, opening the door of the grandfather clock, pulled the ancient weight up and set the pendulum in motion. Then she turned and faced her sister.

"All right, Julia. Let's get it over before John arrives. Say your piece."

Julia did not immediately take up the invitation. When she did, it was with her eyes averted, and in a cold, indifferent voice. "I don't know that there is much to

say. One after another people let you down. Matron, Parsons, John – and now you – and you are the lowest and most despicable! My own sister!" Warmth began to colour her voice. "I always knew you wanted John. Fair enough. I don't blame you for snapping him up, with me out of the way – but to get him to marry you! That is beyond everything!"

"I didn't make him-"

"For God's sake, try to be honest, just for a moment! We both know John can be led by the nose – and you really made a job of it!" There was nothing cool about her now. Red with anger, she practically jumped out of the chair, and pointed with a shaking hand at her twin, "You filthy cow! You've got the morals of an alley cat! Not content with stealing my husband, you have to steal my name as well!"

Mary was deeply angry, breathing hard trying to keep control of herself. "If you must talk like a cheap novelette, I can't stop you. I am trying to make allowances, but I can't see you have to weep salt tears over a name you cannot use anyway." Her rage boiled over, "You're so bloody wrapped up in your own sad story, you can't see any other! Right, so I married John! It may have escaped your notice, sitting back counting your damned medals, but John is the next Prime Minister! D'you think I should let him go through life with me as his mistress? That would look fine, wouldn't it? Or do you think he should remain faithful to you, and wait for your return in twenty years time? And if he wants love and affection – yes, dammit, to put it at its lowest level – if he wants a woman in his bed, has he got to wait twenty years for your doubtful charms?"

Instantly, she regretted the last part, but it was too late.

"You filthy whore, you bitch!" Julia spat the words venomously at her, "By God! Somehow I'll fix you! I'll remember that, I'll get even..."

"Yes?" said Mary swiftly. She was taut, ready for action. "You'll – what?"

There was a faint squeal of brakes. A car door slammed. Mary took a deep breath. She nodded slowly. "Right. Now we both know where we stand. Let it go at that."

"Oh yes!" jeered Julia. "Mustn't upset poor old John, must we?" Nevertheless, she sat down again, and stared once more at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry, Julia, I shouldn't have said..."

"Don't be mealymouthed. You thought it, that's enough." For a brief second the two sisters stared at each other in hate, and then John walked in, stooping slightly to clear the low doorway.

He rubbed his hands and held them to the fire. "Well, that went off all right, then?"

"Yes," said Mary, switching off the radio, "we had no trouble – did we?"

"No, none at all," agreed Julia. Both sisters had their claws well out of sight.

"I was just going to make some cocoa for us – do you want any?"

John shook his head and sat down. He

yawned. "God! What a day!" He looked thoughtfully at Julia. "Well, that's the first big hurdle over. You're quite safe here, quite safe. You can stay here for a few days while I get you a sterility certificate – and some money." He dug into an inside pocket and produced a roll of notes.

Julia stared at him. Just like a man. Walks into the beginnings of a blazing row, and does not notice it.

"Have you thought what you want to do?"

"I would like children's nursing."

John grimaced. "That is a hard one. They're very thoroughly vetted. Background, previous jobs, psychological adjustment – that sort of thing. You'd have

to build up a genuine background first. Nurses are needed badly in the old people's homes – we're an ageing nation now, you know..."

"How about old Mums' homes?" interposed Julia.

"What! How did you know that?" He was obviously concerned.

"A little loose talk I overheard. Don't worry, your charming secret is not general knowledge."

John thought for a moment, then caught sight of the roll of notes in his hand, "Oh yes, you'd better take this for now. It's only about seventy or eighty pounds, but it's a start." He looked slightly apologetic. "I don't have much use for money."

Julia looked surprised.

"No, it's not a lot these days. Average wage is just over thirty pounds a week. Inflation is still with us."

She took the money without speaking and put it in her handbag. Mary came in with the cocoa and biscuits. It all looked so nice, cosy and domestic.

"Mary," said John as casually as he could, "it's a damned nuisance, but I'm afraid there's another crisis. I have to do a lightning tour of the east coast."

Both women stared at him, both with different aspects of the same thought in their minds.

Hastily he explained, "I can't give details, but we've decided to give the Homes strong military protection."

Julia laughed shortly, "I'm honoured!"

"It has absolutely nothing to do with you. But I must go. I'm not going to have the Army stamping and banging all over my parish."

"Farm would be a better word," observed Julia acidly. "Mustn't disturb the herd; bad for production."

John gave her a hard look. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. There was a long silence broken only by the ponderous march of the grandfather clock. Then John stood up, and said abruptly.

"I'm off to bed. The car will be here at six thirty, and it'll be a long day." He hesitated, then turned and left the room. On the stairs he called out to anyone who might be interested, "Good night."

The sisters looked at each other. For a fraction of a second there was an affinity, a bond, between them. Mary used it to try and bridge the gap. "And they call us the weaker sex!"

But Julia did not respond, and Mary immediately reverted to armed watchfulness, regretting her move. In silence she showed Julia her room, sketchily indicating the bathroom, and in silence they parted.

At six thirty precisely, and without disturbing Julia, John left for Skegness. Mary saw him off and then went back to

bed. About nine o'clock she was wakened by the sound of activity in the bathroom, and she got up and went down to the kitchen. She took stock of the refrigerator, then called up the stairs, "D'you want a cooked breakfast?"

There was no reply, then Julia came down, dressed in a borrowed nightgown and with an eiderdown wrapped around her, not for warmth, or for modesty, but concealment. Mary repeated her question in a businesslike voice.

Julia replied in a like vein. "Do you?"

"No. Ryvita and coffee is all I have."

Julia stared contemptuously at her sister in an equally thin nightgown. Words were unnecessary.

Immediately Mary flared up. "Now look here! I don't give a bloody damn if you eat or starve to death! I just want to know." She went on, sarcastically, "It's probably news to you, but deepfreeze stuff can do with thawing out a little before cooking."

"Don't bother. If I want anything, I'll cook it myself."

Mary slammed the fridge door. "All right! Do what you damn' well please! I'm going to have a bath!"

She thumped up the stairs, and Julia was alone. She lost some of her stiffness as her sister left, her shoulders drooped, and she fought hard with herself and the terrible sense of isolation. Now surely she must have hit bottom, she was quite alone, and

had nothing, nothing... But she was free, life could still be good. She opened the casement window, and looked out into the small walled garden. There had been a heavy dew in the night, and the air was cool, earthy. To be free, away from the eternal smell of the sea!

She was still gazing out of the window when Mary came down again, dressed in shirt and slacks. Neither spoke as Mary made the coffee. She poured out two cups and sat down to drink hers.

"Coffee's ready," began Mary. "Look, Julia – we can't go on like this. We were both exhausted last night, let's forget it..."

Julia turned, hitching up the slipping eiderdown. She took in the slim, trim figure of her sister, the firm breasts, the clean-cut neckline, and at once her attitude

hardened. She said, calmly, "You can talk till you're blue in the face, it won't alter my opinion. You're a scheming little bitch who saw what she wanted, and got it. I'll bet you can't wait to be Mrs. Prime Minister. Let's hope that when you get there you'll be able to enjoy it."

The vindictive quality in her voice made her sister look up sharply, "And what do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, dear sister, beyond what I have just said. Let's hope you are able to enjoy it."

Mary banged her cup down. "I've had more than enough of you – I'm not staying here, I'm going back to town!"

"Good!" retorted Julia with false

cordiality. She became reasonable, her voice almost sweet, "Don't worry Mary, I won't steal anything of yours"

Twenty minutes later Mary was backing the car out of the garage. Such was her state of mind, she scraped the car against the wall, and did not bother to get out and inspect the damage. Without a backward glance she drove out of the gate, and headed for London.

Julia's state of mind was also confused. She stood quite still, her eyes darting restless glances around the room as Mary drove away. Now she was really alone, and did not mind if she never saw her sister again. The unity of identical twins is far stronger than most human bonds, but once severed, the division is irrevocable. And both knew it.

For a time she wandered round the living room, touching a chair, an ornament, savouring its difference. Five years is a long time in one place, one room. She would have a place of her own; she too would have real privacy... She daydreamed, making impossible plans, staging scenes in her mind which included a repentant John, and a cast-out Mary...

She was hungry, and a little cold; fantasy retreated before the immediacy of the present. She bathed, and dressed leisurely, dipping into the overnight bag Mary had brought. It was a final, wicked twist that the panties were too tight.

Julia rooted through the well-stocked fridge, and cooked herself a comprehensive breakfast. Ryvita!

The sun was up, and the secluded garden inviting. She had a sudden desire to go out, she had not been alone in a garden for years. She left the washing-up and with infinite care opened the door, checking that she was not overlooked. A house was visible through the trees, presenting a blank expanse of red-brown tiled roof to her. No danger there. She settled on the wall seat, her back resting against the rough stone wall of the cottage. The sun was warm, and Julia was grateful, closing her eyes, basking in the sunlight and the feeling of security and freedom. Life could still be good. "It's a great life if you don't weaken." Trite, but true. By God, it was true!

Vigilance relaxed, she may have dozed. There was no preliminary warning. The first she knew was the grate of leather on stone. Her eyes opened in alarm, alarm

that escalated to speechless, freezing horror.

Two women, raincoated and stoutly shod in brogues, were looking down at her.

Her expression was enough for them. The taller, with sharp-cut black hair, spoke to her companion.

"No one is going to say we didn't do the job properly." She leaned forward menacingly, "Got your ticket?"

Half-frozen with fear, Julia could only think of her handbag. To reach those scissors! Her parched throat was constricted, she managed to croak, "My, my handbag."

The tall woman played with her. "You'll have to do better than that," she said

reprovingly, but with infinite latent menace. "You really will. We've looked already – you shouldn't leave it lying around – not with all that money – and those nasty sharp scissors. Might cut yourself!"

The second woman, a good deal shorter and broader, grinned appreciatively at her companion's wit. She spoke, "What's your name?"

"I – I – , " Julia could not answer.

The tall woman was less playful now. "If the certificate is not in your handbag, where is it?"

"I – I lost it," Julia tried to fight back, "What right – how..."

The tall woman had it off pat, "Section Two

of the Visit and Search Order, 1972, that's our right. How? Well now, let's say we found the key, shall we?" She was ferociously genial, "That's right isn't it, Mabel?" Her eyes never left Julia.

Mabel nodded vigorously, "Yes, that's right, we found the key."

They both laughed and then the taller woman's manner changed abruptly. "Come on, get up. We can hold you for that alone. Unclassified, you are – without your ticket – if you want to go on pretending you've even seen one. OK, play it your way. We don't mind. You'll be retested – and the Lord help you then." She smiled.

Julia was incapable of movement. The short MOHS woman suddenly reached forward and jerked her to her feet. Julia

swayed, reached forward to support herself, and got a stinging blow across her cheek.

"See that!" said the taller triumphantly, "resisting arrest, she was!"

"She's a dangerous one," responded Mabel, delighted with her own humour.

They half-walked half-dragged Julia through the house and out to a waiting car. She was thrust in the back seat, and the short woman crowded in after her, forcing her in a corner. A short delay, and the senior woman got into the driving seat. The slamming car door was, to Julia, like the gates of Hell shutting behind her.

The woman in the driving seat was adjusting her porkpie hat, studying her

reflection in the driving mirror. She spoke without turning her head.

"Where d'you live, dear?" Her off-hand, casual manner terrified Julia, she could not speak, she watched with horror the gleaming hatpin the woman held between her teeth as she set her hat at the regulation angle.

"Answer!" The short woman struck her a sharp backhander on her already swelling cheek.

Choking, tears rolling down her face, Julia gasped, "I – I live – here!"

"Oh yes?" said her tormentor conversationally, "how long?"

"I – one year – two years..."

"Married?"

"Yes – no! No, not now." God, not now!

"OK, what's the name of the village pub?" The woman's tone was harder now.

"I can't remember..."

"Oh, hard luck!" Again the mock sympathy. "Well – what's the name of this road?"

"I – I," Julia could not go on.

"You're a lying little cow, aren't you, dear," said the woman genially. She turned to her companion in the back, "Isn't she, Mabel?"

Mabel nodded, her eyes bright. She hit Julia again.

"Now!" reproved the senior woman. "I know you've missed your weekend because of her, but save it, Mabel, save it." She looked at Julia's quivering, puffy face. "You enjoy the ride back Home, dear. Make the most of it. Mabel's annoyed, lost her weekend she has – all through you. And she's duty tomorrow." She injected mock surprise into her voice, "You'll meet tomorrow – she'll be on the other end of that whip – and she's a bloody artist with it – aren't you, Mabel?"

Mabel grinned sheepishly.

Chapter Nine

Mary was locking the car when the tall woman with grey hair approached her.

"Mrs. Bart?"

Mary nodded. She could guess.

"I'm Penelope Stephens. I'd rather like to talk to you, if you can spare me a few moments." It was masterly understatement, like "helping the police with their inquiries." Mary made no comment, but led the way up to the flat.

In the lift, the visitor spoke. "Forgive the spying, but one of my patrol cars saw you in Esher, so I came here and waited for you."

Mary barely nodded at the MOHS Commandant. Inside the flat, she waved a brief invitation for her visitor to sit, but both remained standing.

"This is a delicate matter, Mrs. Bart. I thought we might get it straightened out without worrying the Minister." It was nicely put.

"Do sit down," said Mary. She intended to remain standing.

The Commandant could afford to concede the odd point. She nodded, smiled faintly,

and sat. She was clearly determined to keep the matter on as light and casual level as possible. "Acting – as the police say – on information received, two of my women visited your cottage about an hour ago. They found the absentee, and she is now being returned to her Home."

"An hour!" Mary was startled, her guard slipped. "But that must have been within a half an hour of my leaving!"

The Commandant was not disposed to argue. "Very probably, Mrs. Bart." She looked with synthetic interest at the carpet. "We were already watching the cottage when – someone – telephoned, so there was no delay."

"You had my place watched?" Mary was surprised. If she had known!

"It seemed a reasonable precaution; you are the absentee's sister."

"Let's come to the point, Commandant," said Mary abruptly, "what are you going to do?"

Two cold grey eyes regarded her dispassionately. "Do, Mrs. Bart?" Her voice was almost devoid of expression. "I'd say, nothing. I'm quite sure the Minister knows nothing of this – and we have recovered what is ours. Whether or not you were aware of her presence is in the circumstances, idle speculation. I only know that the Minister was quite," she stressed the word, "quite explicit in his orders for her recovery. In view of this and in accordance with our legal rights, we inspected your cottage. That is the whole story. A routine inspection of suspected premises."

So that was the official line. Thin, but plausible. Few would know anything of the episode, and fewer still the true story. The MOHS woman got up to go.

"Yes," said Mary flatly, "well, thank you for taking all this trouble."

"Not at all, Mrs. Bart. It occurred to me that you might care to tell the Minister."

So that was the quid pro quo.

"Very well. Perhaps it would be best." Mary looked away from the cold expressionless eyes. She fumbled with a cushion, straightening it unnecessarily. "My sister – can you see she is treated..." The words came haltingly.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Bart, truly sorry." The Commandant was sincere but adamant. "You will appreciate – for the very reason that you ask – that we must let events take their normal course. To do otherwise would be disastrous to Home morale."

Mary was close to tears. "It's so damned unfair! She asks so little, really!"

"She asks more than the nation can give." The Commandant unbent a fraction. "Do not think we are unfeeling, unaware of the tragedy, but there is the bigger tragedy of the nation. That must take precedence. If it is any consolation to you, I intend taking a personal interest in her future." There was a significant pause. "After tomorrow."

"But can't you have her graded unfit?" pleaded Mary.

"You don't know Home life, Mrs. Bart, it cannot be done. It is a close-knit community. Such action could not be kept secret. In any case, the machine is in motion, and no one can stop it." There was utter finality in her voice. "I have thought of various ideas – a transfer to another Home, for example, but none of them would work. I can only assure you I will do all I can for her."

In silence Mary saw her to the door. The Commandant had the last word.

"We put the key of the cottage back where we found it. Good day, Mrs. Bart."

John got back late the next night, Sunday. He was tired and edgy, trailing the remnants of his cold official manner.

Partly by design, partly by desire, Mary embraced him as soon as he was in the flat, standing on tiptoe, close, her head buried on his chest, smelling the cold night air of his coat. He held her, his eyes shut.

"God! It's so good, so good to be with you!"

They stood quite still. A police-car siren, ululated distantly, and they held each other tighter. At last he spoke.

"How are things down at Bramley?" Somehow he could not bring himself to name his former wife.

Mary locked her hands behind his back, so that he could not get free. Quickly in a low voice, she told him the story she had

accepted from the Commandant.

He tried to break away, but Mary held on with desperate strength.

"Why was I not told – why – why! Let me go, Mary! You don't know..."

"No! There's nothing you can do, John. Listen! Listen to me! I told the Commandant it would be best if I told you. If you think for a moment you'll see that! You couldn't do anything, you're caught up in the web as much as anyone else! And now it's too late. Too late..." She was crying now. "Julia is resting – that's the official word, resting."

He stopped resisting and tightened his grip on her. Mary went on, "So blame me, no one else! I could not let you face this deci-

sion — either way you'd have loathed yourself. Whatever I've done," she spoke with great fervency, "was for you, because I love you and knew what was best for you — even if you hate me for it."

"Never that, never. But had I known she had been retaken..." He could hardly go on.

"No, darling, no! Later you'll understand."

"Poor Julia! I should have realised they'd watch the cottage, but it never occurred to me they would have the nerve to search the place..."

Mary went cold with fear. Quickly she stalled the inevitable question.

"I know I shouldn't have left her, but she wanted to be alone..."

He shook her gently. "Don't reproach yourself, my dear. You did all you could. You've been marvellous, marvellous..." His voice faded to a whisper, hoarse with emotion, his head bent forward on her neck, and he wept.

It was then that Mary really hated herself.

PART THREE

Slowly Bart paced up and down the gravel path in the secluded, hidden garden of 10 Downing Street. The few plane trees had shed their leaves. Usually he secretly enjoyed scuffing through the remnants of summer shade, but now he did it unconsciously, the crisp dry rustling sound passing unnoticed.

It was November 1990. The summer had been bad, and early hard frosts in October boded ill for the winter. Just now, a pale sun shone, and he was grateful for its thin warmth.

"You shouldn't be out there without your

coat!"

His answering smile matched the sunlight. Thin, disembodied. All the same he walked leisurely toward the steps which led up into the house.

Mary watched, then, sure he was coming in, she shivered slightly, and went in herself.

He walked with slow deliberate tread up the steps. There was a slight nagging pain in his side which he ignored.

"You're hopeless, darling, quite hopeless. Going out there without a coat..."

She rattled on, and that too he ignored. Mary, pleasantly plump, fighting a losing battle with her waistline and greying hair,

was always rattling on these days. It did not matter. It did not matter.

He looked back into the garden with regret. It was so familiar an oasis – as well it might be – for he had been the tenant of 10 Downing Street for nearly seven years, ever since old Farmer had died of a heart attack during the New Zealand crisis. So many crises...

That had been out-and-out piracy. Farmer had chosen well in striking at their South Island Home. Five hundred females had been captured in what was probably the last offensive operation of the Royal Navy. There had been a dreadful, fearful moment, when it looked as if the United Nations might act; and at the height of the crisis Farmer had died, and the inheritance was Bart's. But, as Farmer had predicted at the outset, the UN had neither the interest

nor the power to act. Farmer...

"...is quite beyond my understanding, and you have this simply ghastly meeting in five minutes..."

Mary was right. Mary was always right. Always right... That Cabinet meeting. A full Cabinet meeting, was in five minutes...

He poured himself an extra-large Scotch and gulped it down, his fourth since lunch...

He smiled absently at Mary's taut, set expression, knowing her thoughts. There were many lines in her face now. Many lines... but still she was marvellous, a wonderful woman...

The Cabinet meeting began, the hum of voices died as Bart looked up and down

the table, his silver hair gleamed as usual, but one or two noted the unusual disarray. Trained by Farmer, he did not waste time.

"Gentlemen. I have called this emergency meeting," he paused, looking at the intent faces around him, smiled faintly and bitterly at some private thought, "to consider a report by the Minister of Health and Regeneration. What we can do about it, I have no idea." He paused again, and repeated, "no idea." His voice took on new strength. "A long time ago, Farmer said 'Nature produces nothing useless.' It was much truer than he knew. Much truer."

One or two Ministers exchanged quick looks. Bart was odd, very odd.

He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "I could go on, but there is no point. No point at all." Again he smiled, as if at some

personal joke. He looked down the table with sudden directness. "You go on, Peter."

The Minister of Health and Regeneration stood up, an action which, of itself alarmed the Ministers.

"As you know," his voice was dry, squeaky with stress, "it was agreed by the best authorities that breeding could begin at fifteen. Experience has shown this to be reasonable. As a result, the first girls produced by the Homes became available last year. We now have the figures for the first quarter's production."

He paused and gulped, reading again the figures he knew by heart.

"I have to tell you," he hesitated to regain control of his voice, "that eight hundred and

thirty-seven girls have produced two thousand, three hundred and forty-eight children." He took off his glasses, tossed them carelessly on the table, and in a voice that was little more than a croak, said, "I can't go on."

"All right, Peter." Bart looked with faint contempt at his successor. With difficulty, he stood up, his hands planted firmly on the table, leaning forward, a twisted smile on his face and utter desolation in his eyes.

"Not long ago," his enunciation was not clear, and the Chancellor, next to him, caught a strong whiff of whiskey, "I had a report, yes, a report from a bright, up-and-coming young geneticist. He said that the girls born of the Mums might be sterile! Sterile! D'you know what I did?" He looked aggressively around the silent, shocked Cabinet. "I'll tell you, I'll tell you! I tore the

bloody thing up!" He waved one hand, and nearly lost his balance. "There! Just like that! All right! I was wrong, shouldn't have done it, he was right! Dear old Mother Nature knew he was right! They would be sterile. Why – how – who knows? Who knows..." His voice dropped. Momentarily he lost his train of thought, muttering, "Who knows... well – she did! So there you are – nature produces nothing useless... Farmer's right, nature's right... so she arranges all those bits in that DNA chain – and what do we get? Boys – boys – boys!" He made a last effort, his legs were weakening, his whole being was collapsing, "an' that's all you will get – boys!"

The End